

Kazuki Amamiya

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Haibara's Teenage

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Prologue: Regretful Teen Years

If I had to describe my three years of high school in one word, hands down it'd be "gray." I'd never managed to shake my teen regrets. *Maybe things would be different now if I had done this instead of that, A instead of B.* Imagining what could have been, I'd cook up these impossible fantasies.

Back in middle school, I'd been a hard introvert: no club activities, no girlfriend, and no friends to speak of. I was always alone. The other students chattering happily together in class made me jealous. I felt envious of the guys flirting after school with the girl I secretly had a crush on.

Come high school, I'd resolved to achieve my own "rainbow-colored youth," as if I could become some kind of dating sim game protagonist. So I attempted to make my high school debut, but I failed. Spectacularly.

By way of comparison, my middle school days had been a million times better. Whereas back then I'd merely been a loner, I was blatantly isolated in high school. Everyone—and I mean everyone—hated me.

I know; it was all my fault. Everything had been going well at first. No, it only looked like everything was going well. That's why I got cocky. And because of that critical mistake, everything was ruined.

"Hey, Natsuki? Sorry, man, but I can't stick up for you anymore. Besides, you piss me off."

I could still vividly remember when those words had slapped me across the face and everything started going downhill.

I was an idiot. That was all.

From then on, I devoted myself to living an upright life. However, I knew that regaining lost trust was much harder than building it fresh with someone new. In the end, my naive rainbow-colored dreams died, and my high school life stayed the same dull gray from start to finish.

I'd been haunted by these regrets ever since, and I'd probably stay haunted

until I died.

It was now the winter of my fourth year in college. *How many years have you been hung up on all this?* I mockingly asked myself. I lit the cigarette in my mouth and slowly breathed out smoke. In the blink of an eye, I had become an adult.

I'd spent my college life weighed down with the regrets from my high school screwups, just trying to pass the days innocuously. I'd returned to introversion, but fed up with failure, I made a few casual friends whom I could occasionally go drinking with. Had someone asked me, "Are you having fun?" I honestly wouldn't have known how to answer them, but things weren't bad. It was just right for me.

My senior thesis was progressing well, and I had enough credit hours to graduate. I'd also received a job offer from an infrastructure company with stable future prospects. At this rate, I would probably graduate on schedule, work a normal job, and live a normal life. I didn't hate the thought of normalcy. *Being able to live a normal life is a fortunate thing.*

But my high school regrets would never disappear. Three gray years of high school—those precious days had long since passed. People always say, "You can change starting now!" and I'd agree with that statement. However, even if I were to change now, I would never regain all that lost time.

All I'd wanted was a vibrant high school life, something I would never get to experience now. But life goes on. No matter how much the past weighed on my mind, time would continue ticking forward.

I have no choice but to keep living. I smiled bitterly. My past didn't torment me enough for me to want to die, but it sure did make me sentimental. *Being a teenager doesn't work out for lots of people. I bet it's a common regret. Yeah, I'm sure it is!*

So there and then, I made a wish to god, just one small wish.

God, if you could grant me one wish, please give me a chance to redo my youth.

Chapter 1: The Rainbow-Colored Youth Plan

“Huh?”

I had no clue what just happened. A second ago, I was leisurely reminiscing in the smoking area of an izakaya, but suddenly, I was at home. *What the heck?*

I blinked hard and pinched my cheeks over and over, but I really was in my old bedroom at my parents’ house.

After graduating from high school, I’d moved to Tokyo by myself for college. The izakaya I had just been in was by the station nearest to my apartment, so of course it was in Tokyo. But my parents’ house was in Gunma Prefecture, about two hours from Tokyo by train.

When had I left the izakaya and gotten on a train back to Gunma? No matter how I tried to spin it, I couldn’t reconcile where I currently was.

In the first place, I’d been nowhere near blackout drunk today. Plus, it felt as if I’d instantly teleported from one place to another. The more I tried to understand the situation, the more confused I became.

I should go talk to mom and dad first, I thought. However, the moment I tried to move, I was assaulted by a bizarre sensation. I lost control of my balance and collapsed onto the floor. When I tried to stand up, I felt dizzy.

What the...?

The sensation wasn’t like being drunk; it felt closer to motion sickness. I couldn’t control my body properly—it was almost as if I’d swapped bodies with a different person.

“I heard a loud thump. Are you okay?” a clear voice called as the door to my room swung open.

My sister? I haven’t heard her voice in a while! I rarely went home to visit, so it had probably been around a year since I last saw her.

Holding back the nausea, I turned to the door and saw my younger sister

dressed in her middle school uniform.

“Uh, are you cosplaying?” I was so surprised that my nausea completely vanished.

“What are you talking about, onii-chan?”

My little sister, Haibara Namika, was in her second year of college. She was way too old to be accidentally wearing her middle school uniform around.

However, standing before me was my sister from her middle school days. Her hair was no longer permed or dyed blonde, but straight and black again. Her mature face from my memories had regained its baby fat, her height had shrunk, and her chest had also disappeared.

The way Namika had called me “onii-chan” seemed way off too. From the moment she’d entered high school, she’d dropped that cutesy nickname and always called me “aniki.”

Impossible, I thought. Then I remembered what I’d wished for just moments ago.

“Hey, Namika... What year is it?”

“Huh? It’s 2014. Why?”

No way! It’s supposed to be 2021. I could see someone being off by a year or two, but being off by seven years is just absurd.

But Namika didn’t seem to be joking. She looked at me, head tilted to the side, with an expression that said, *Why are you asking the obvious?*

If she was telling the truth, then did that mean I had flown back seven years? That would be ridiculous! As I tried to digest what was happening, I stood up in front of the mirror in my room.

“You gotta be kidding me...”

That was me in the glass, except it was the me from middle school. The glasses were a dead giveaway; I’d started putting effort into my appearance and ditched them once I entered high school.

Before my infamous high school debut, I had long, unkempt hair that covered

my eyes, tacky glasses, and a noticeably round belly. To see myself back in this state made me feel sick. I didn't want to admit that I used to look like this.

Namika said it's 2014. That means I'm either in my last year of middle school, or I'm a freshman in high school right about now.

Well, that definitely checked out with my current appearance. Namika also clearly looked like a middle schooler. I could only conclude that I had somehow traveled back in time.

At first, I had thought this was some kind of hidden camera prank, but no joke would go that far. A gag of this magnitude would have taken a lot of effort to set up, but I wasn't even a very amusing target. It's not like I had any friends who'd want to prank me in the first place.

I pinched my cheek once more to double-check if this was just a dream, but the pain was very real.

"Onii-chan, what's up with you?" Namika shot me a puzzled look.

Around this time, Namika had been a kind and honest girl. All things considered, we were still only about as close as your average pair of siblings, but by the time she entered high school, Namika had grown to hate me.

"Nothing. I was just feeling a bit off." It wasn't a lie. I definitely felt some sort of disconnect from being inside my younger body. *When is this nausea going to go away?* I wondered. *Though, I do feel better than before.*

"Hmm. Do you have a fever?"

"Nah. I'm sure I'll feel better soon."

"Well, it's a good thing you got sick *after* your graduation ceremony. Get some sleep." With that, Namika turned around and walked back to her room.

I closed the door behind her and then sat down on my bed. Sitting alone helped me calm down, not that being calm changed anything.

I was still back in the past. In manga and anime, I'd seen this phenomenon referred to as a "time leap." It was hard to believe that something so unrealistic could take place, but that's clearly what had just happened to me.

I let out a sigh and then tried to change gears. Nothing would come from

brooding over something I didn't understand. I needed more information. My nausea had mostly subsided, so I decided to investigate my room.

The first thing I looked at was my clock. It was 5:06 p.m. on the tenth of March. If my memory was correct, that was actually the date of my graduation ceremony. Namika had also mentioned the ceremony being over. That pretty much confirmed my suspicion; I had somehow gone back to my past self, just after I'd graduated from middle school.

Next, I inspected my bookshelf. Sure enough, it was filled with my old manga and books. *Wait.* As a dedicated otaku, a sudden realization hit me hard. *If I can't return to the future, that means I won't be able to read the next chapter of all the series I've been following for seven whole years!* That was obvious, though. Because I was seven years in the past, only anime, manga, and books from at least seven years ago would exist.

Back in 2014, I had already checked out all the series that I was interested in, so if I wanted to find something new to read or watch, I'd need to look at series that I'd previously disregarded.

Hah. Looks like I've already discovered a downside to time leaping.

Wanting to ignore the grim reality of my situation, I looked at the smartphone on my desk. It was a model from long ago—one of the first to be sold. *What a throwback!* I'd received it in my second year of middle school, and it'd lasted me until I entered college.

I picked the phone up and unlocked it without any issues. Luckily, when I'd gotten a new one, I had kept the same password. For a moment I'd been worried about what I would do if I didn't remember the password, but I wasn't the type of person to change it. Instead, I'd rather memorize a handful of passwords and then reuse those for everything.

I opened RINE, a messaging app. The only contacts I had saved were Namika and my mom. My dad was still using a flip phone at this time. *How nostalgic.*

Next, I opened Twister, a social media app where you could make quick public posts. My feed was full of content from official anime and manga accounts, manga artists, novelists, and illustrators. I was what you called a Twister lurker.

There were also several old social games on my phone. *That's right; everyone was into Puzzle & Tigers in 2014.* I used to be crazy about that game too, but I stopped playing it in college.

"Hmm..." I finished looking through my phone and then put it back down on my desk. My textbooks and notebooks were stacked nearby, with my middle school diploma carelessly thrown on top.

I heard the front door open while I rifled through my old things. Mom had probably just got home from work, right on schedule. Both of my parents worked full time, but my dad didn't live with us because he had been transferred to the Tohoku region.

My mom came into my room. "Natsuki, are you home? Congratulations on graduating! I'm sorry I couldn't make it to the ceremony. Work got hectic and —" When she saw my face, she paused her chattering. "Natsuki? You look pale. Are you feeling sick?" Seeing mom still acting and looking the same as she did seven years in the future was a relief somehow.

"Yeah, just a bit," I replied. "Can I nap until dinner?"

"Of course, of course. Did you take your temperature? Oh, where on earth did I put the cold compresses?!"

"It's nothing major. I don't need all that." My mom was a worrywart, so I shooed her out of my room before she could go into overdrive.

I really was feeling bad, and all the confusion had made me sleepy. I lay down in my bed and the drowsiness hit that much harder. I gave myself over to the sweet relief of sleep.

When I woke up, I was still in the past. I really hadn't been dreaming, and I felt less nauseous too.

That night, my mom cooked up an extravagant dinner in celebration of my graduation. She'd probably done the same thing the first time around, but I didn't remember everything that happened back then. She asked me how the graduation ceremony had gone, so I recounted what I could from my vague recollections before I returned to my room.

I stood before my mirror once more. The embodiment of gloom and doom stared back at me. Yes, this dismal boy was who I'd been before entering high school.

There's no point trying to come up with reasons why this happened, I thought. I wouldn't know what's true, after all. I should just focus on the outcome. I'm currently seven years in the past, which means I have the chance to redo my life. I messed up the first time I went through high school, but now I can fix things! I asked god to give me a chance to redo my youth, so let's just say my wish was granted.

I didn't want the regrets of my teen years to haunt me any longer. This time, I would live out my youth to the fullest! I stared at myself in the mirror and swore to myself: *I will have a successful high school debut and overwrite my drab old high school memories with ones full of vibrant colors!*

Let's see. Today was my middle school graduation ceremony, so it's the tenth of March. My high school entrance ceremony is the eighth of April, meaning I have about a month of spring vacation. That's not very long, but it's time for a transformation!

Although I had been eager to make my high school debut the first time, my attempt to change my appearance had been half-assed. All I'd done was lose a bit of weight and drop my glasses for contacts. Then, I didn't look particularly good or bad, just average.

However, this time around, maybe something would change if I really improved my looks. At any rate, I thought it couldn't possibly make things worse. *They say appearances make up ninety percent of a person, or something like that.*

It was a good thing this time leap hadn't landed me right before the entrance ceremony. A few days were plenty if all I needed was minimal grooming, but I needed at least a month to slim down.

I began going on daily jogs in the neighborhood. My sedentary body would get fatigued almost instantly, but I couldn't afford to take it easy. Every day, I pushed myself to the brink of collapsing then returned home dripping in sweat.

I slept like a log at night, so the time flew by.

I told my mom that I wanted to lose weight, and she helped me out by managing my diet. In the morning, I would run until I was about to collapse, rest up, and then run some more. In the afternoon, I focused on building muscle. I did multiple sets of push-ups, sit-ups, back exercises, and squats, with breaks and stretching in between. With every passing day, I upped the number of sets as well.

I had nothing else to do, so I spent every waking moment exercising.

My exercise routine continued for three weeks, and before I knew it, I had lost fifteen kilograms. At one point, I was down twenty kilograms, but then my muscle mass started to increase and I found myself gaining weight instead.

When I looked at my reflection, I was pleased to see that I had achieved my objective with flying colors. Three weeks ago, I had been just a big fatty, but now I was tall and slim. My height was pretty much always the only thing I had going for me.

My mom, delighted by my transformation, encouraged me to join a gym, so I did. It had various machines and even gave me access to a pool. Now I was able to exercise even more efficiently.

Of course, I wouldn't go as far as calling myself a macho man, but my pecs were thicker, my abs more defined, and my arms and legs were firming up. Maybe even enough to classify me as a lean kinda guy!

It was tough in the beginning, but somewhere along the way I started enjoying exercising. I feel like I deviated from my original goal of losing weight. In fact, I'm pretty sure I cleared that bar a while ago. W-Well, that can't be bad. It might be a different story if I become too brawny, though.

Gains aside, time flies when you're having fun lifting weights. It was now two days before the entrance ceremony. Bodybuilding had gone well, but what I needed was some proper grooming. Which was why I was currently scrambling to get ready.

First, I took out money that I'd stashed in the depths of my drawer to buy

contacts. *Replacing your glasses with contacts is a must for a high school debut. They'd be fine if I wanted to go for the intellectual look, but I don't really look good in glasses.*

When I swapped out my glasses for contacts, I immediately started giving off athlete vibes. *Not too shabby*, I thought. *My hair's too long and shaggy, but my build makes up for it. All right, time to visit the hairdresser.*

I knew from experience that I had terrible fashion sense, so I decided to leave my hair in the hands of a fairly pricey stylist. And so, I headed for a well-known salon by the station.

Ten thousand yen was a lot for a high school student, but the results made it worth the cost.

"Whoa." I looked like a put-together athlete. *Dare I say people might even consider me a hunk?*

To be honest, I doubted my eyes at first. Who would've thought that the gloomy, overweight otaku I used to be could transform into a whole new guy? For once, I could actually believe my hairdresser's compliments.

The trade-off was that I wouldn't look this good if I didn't style my hair with wax every day. To tell the truth, doing that every morning was a pain in the butt, but I had already decided I would work hard to have the best high school life ever.

My clothes are still lame, but I'm a high schooler. We've got uniforms. I'll think about my wardrobe if the need arises.

When I got home, Namika was watching TV in the living room. Her eyes popped out of her head when she saw me.

"Onii-chan...is that really you?"

"Who else would it be? How do I look?"

Namika was silent for a moment. "Pretty decent. Not that I would know." She'd looked away when I asked her for her opinion, but I knew this was her way of giving her stamp of approval. Namika had trouble expressing her honest feelings and tended to play disinterested when complimenting someone.

“Oh my, Natsuki! You look great now!” my mom exclaimed as soon as she came home from work. With her additional praise, I couldn’t deny the truth any longer. After seeing both of their reactions, I knew it wasn’t just my imagination; I really had turned into a good-looking guy.

Confidence restored, I gave myself a big grin in the mirror. I was going for a refreshing smile to match my new look, but it turned out more like a creepy smirk.

Yeah, I should practice smiling.

I spent the next day browsing a website called “Tips for a Successful High School Debut” and buying school supplies. And so, the day of the entrance ceremony finally arrived.

The night before the ceremony, I’d been so nervous that I hadn’t gotten much sleep. I definitely could have done with some more rest, but I was wired and wide awake come morning.

You can’t blame me for being a bundle of nerves; it’s D-Day, after all. Yep, today’s the day I redo my youth! One month’s passed since the time leap—one month full of preparation. Remember the goal: I’m going to paint over my gray teen years with colorful, happy memories this time. And I doubt god will give me another chance if I mess this up; I can’t count on any third tries. It’s do or die! I gave myself a pep talk.

Ugh, my stomach kinda hurts. Oh no, my nerves are getting to me! Relax. My preparations were perfect, I thought, trying to take the pressure off. *It’s only 6 a.m. I’m not falling asleep anytime soon so I guess I’ll go for a run.*

I changed into workout clothes and left the house. The sky was a pleasant blue and the gentle spring breeze felt refreshing. I did some light warm-up exercises and then started running. In the beginning of my workout journey, I would run laps around my neighborhood, but now I could run a good distance away from home.

Of course, the entrance ceremony was today, so I only planned to run far enough to get rid of the nerves. Realistically, I could’ve run ten times farther

than when I'd first started jogging and still probably been fine.

I listened to a new song from a band that I knew would become popular in the future while running. My neighborhood was a quiet one, with few cars and people in the streets. Well, the early hour probably contributed to the lack of activity, but it was a good area to jog in at any rate.

Once I'd finished running a lap around town, I stopped at the park in my neighborhood. I figured it was a good place to take a break, plus I wanted to admire the beautiful cherry blossoms in full bloom. This park was kind of a best-kept secret among locals.

"Natsuki?" A voice called out while I was enjoying the flowers. I turned to see a beautiful, black-haired girl whose face I actually knew quite well.

"Hey, Miori! It's been a while. Haven't seen you since graduation."

Her name was Motomiya Miori. We'd been schoolmates all the way back since kindergarten. I guess she was something like a childhood friend. She didn't live next to me, though, nor were our families close. If I'd had the kind of childhood friend you see in anime, my teen years wouldn't have been so drab.

Miori and I used to be friends in kindergarten and elementary school, but we'd stopped talking to each other in middle school. In my original time, I hadn't even known what college she'd gone to, let alone what she was doing. That's about how close we were.

"What the... You, uh, you look a lot different." Miori rubbed her eyes and took another good look at me.

"I'm gonna look the same no matter how much you stare, you know."



“Oh, uh...I was wondering if I was dreaming.”

“I’m surprised you even recognize me at all, if I look different enough that you think you’re dreaming.”

“Well, now you look a lot like you did in elementary school, when you were skinnier and you didn’t wear glasses... Anyway, what happened to you? You’re so different that I’m suspicious you took some kind of dangerous drug. I mean, it’s only been a month since I last saw you at the graduation ceremony!”

“I worked out over spring break because I had nothing better to do. I’m actually in the middle of a jogging break right now.”

“Hmm.” Miori eyed me up and down. “Yeah, but your whole look is way different. What, are you going for a high school glow up?”

I grimaced. She’d hit the nail right on the head. “Yeah, I am. What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing. If anything, it’s good. Uh-huh.” Miori nodded multiple times for emphasis. “You know, before, you looked pretty tacky. And you were fat. But I always thought you could look good if you actually tried. Glad to see I wasn’t crazy to think that!”

Her words cut into me like a knife. *Don’t diss how I used to look; just compliment the way I look now!*

“Oh, I’m walking my dog right now,” Miori explained, even though I hadn’t asked. “I’m always up at this time. Isn’t that right, Ku-chan?” Anyone could see that she was walking her dog. The white toy poodle standing at Miori’s feet wagged its tail eagerly in response to hearing its name.

“Wow, you’re an early riser,” I commented. It was currently 6:30 in the morning, and I’d usually be waking up around now.

“I’ll have to get up this early for morning practice once school starts. So I’m getting myself used to it.”

“Oh yeah, you were on the basketball team, right?”

“That’s right. And of course I’ll be playing in high school too.” Miori flexed her arm with a grunt.

Man, she's got a lotta muscle for a girl, I thought.

Even still, her flexing had been very feminine. It was a big departure from how tomboyish she used to be. That said, no matter how cute she was now, my memories of “Brat Commander” Miori would never leave me.

“Well, you’ve changed a lot too,” I said.

“Hm? You think so? Well, we didn’t talk at all in middle school, huh? We were never in the same class either. Plus, you didn’t have any friends, so there wasn’t even a chance for overlap.”

“Oh, shut up,” I sulked. *It’s not like I wanted to be a loner!*

Miori smothered a giggle with her hand when she saw me pout. “I’m guessing you still remember me the way I was in elementary school. Well, too bad! The cool Miori-chan that you adored is long gone. Sorry!”

“Cool?! You were just a snot-nosed brat!”

“Who are you calling a brat?! I was just a little tomboyish!”

I snorted when Miori said that, which made her puff up her cheeks.

I was surprised by how naturally we were talking to each other. Back in middle school, we’d gone three whole years without speaking (plus an additional seven years for me). I thought it would’ve been more awkward.

Well, if it were the past me, Miori’s sunny disposition would’ve made me wither up and run away. Perhaps I could only speak to her all calm and collected because my mental age was older.

“Oh yeah, Natsuki, what high school are you going to?”

“Hm? You don’t know?”

“Of *course* I don’t. We never talked.”

Oh yeah. I didn’t have any friends either, so there’d be no one to spread the word to Miori and her circle of friends. But I knew which high school Miori was going to attend; I’d overheard all kinds of things from my classmates. It was a school in our prefecture with a solid academic standard score and thriving extracurriculars. However, it was pretty far from our hometown, so not many

students from our middle school went there.

This year, only two people from our middle school would be attending that high school. And those two people were...

"I'm going to Ryomei. Ryomei High School," I told her.

"No, wait, what?! That's the same school I'm going to!"

That's right—me and Miori. For the record, I didn't pick this school to be with her on purpose; it really was just a coincidence.

"Yeah, I already knew. I overheard my classmates talking about it," I admitted.

"Oh, come on! Tell me that sooner!"

"And when would I have had the chance to tell you that sooner?"

Miori fell silent for a moment and then asked, "By the way, is anyone else going to Ryomei? Don't tell me it's just you and me?"

"Wouldn't you know better than me? I just heard through the grapevine where you were going." I actually did know it would be just the two of us, but it would have been unnatural to admit that.

"To my knowledge, it was just me," she said.

"Then it's probably just you and me."

"Whaaat...? I guess that's fine. But wow, I'm with you of all people. We've gone to the same school for so long that we're like real childhood friends. Honestly, I don't know if I like that."

"Hey, insult me when I'm not around." *My mentality is as weak as tofu right now*, I thought. "Why did you pick Ryomei of all places, anyway?"

"That's my line! Why are *you* going there?" she shot right back at me.

I hesitated for a moment. "I picked a school that I thought no one from our middle school would attend."

Miori's brows momentarily furrowed in confusion before her face lit up with a bright, understanding smile. "Ah, I get it! High school debuts are awkward if someone from the same middle school is there, huh?"

Reluctantly, I answered, “Yep, you got it.”

“Aha ha! I see, I see. Don’t worry; I’ll keep quiet since you want me to. I’m a nice girl, after all.”

“So? What about you? I told you my reason.” I couldn’t recall what Miori’s reason was. We’d probably never spoken even once during high school.

“You don’t know? The girls’ basketball team at Ryomei is really strong.”

“Ah, gotcha. So they recruited you.” Miori was the ace of our middle school girls’ basketball club. Since we were young, her athletic ability had been a cut above the rest. *She’s still just a brat commander, though.*

“Yeeep! And after a quick search, I saw that the school building is new, their facilities are great, plus they’re close to a station, and their standard scores are right where I was aiming for. It looked too good to pass up, besides the long commute, of course.”

“Even though no one from our middle school is going?”

“It’s fine. I can just make new friends. Unlike you, I’m good at socializing!”

“Urgh.” I had no rebuttal, seeing how I had messed up my adolescence once already. In middle school, I didn’t have the backbone to talk to anyone. And although the beginning of high school had gone well, I didn’t know how to read the room since I had no experience interacting with people. That’s why I’d ended up being hated by literally everyone.

The only reason I could talk to a girl the same age as me right now was because we were childhood friends. I would definitely be too nervous to hold a normal conversation if it were with a random girl I barely knew.

“By the way, did you work out because you’re joining a sports club?”

“No... I wasn’t thinking about stuff like that.” For a split second, images of my high school days flashed through my mind. I’d joined the basketball club during my first debut attempt. My idea, albeit a half-baked one, was that joining the soccer or basketball club would help me come off as an upbeat person. I ended up choosing the basketball club because of my height.

Big mistake!

The basketball club was tough enough for inexperienced people who, at the very least, had a history in athletics. I, on the other hand, had belonged to the so-called “go home club,” with zero experience playing any kind of sport. I couldn’t keep up with practice at all, and my fellow teammates treated me like I was a gross tumor because of that. Then, once everyone in class started hating me, the team didn’t need to keep talking to me to maintain the pretense of camaraderie. No one spoke to me at all unless they had to.

Those memories were so painful that they made me want to crawl into bed and roll around.

“Aw, that’s a shame. You’re pretty tall, Natsuki. You should play basketball too.”

“I was part of the go home club in middle school. That’s way too much for me!”

“Nah, no way. You’re tall; it’ll work out.”

That’s what I assumed too, the first time I joined the basketball club, I thought bitterly. To be fair, I did improve my skills because I didn’t have the guts to quit, so I ended up sticking with it. So maybe it would work out this time. But in the end, my problem isn’t basketball; it’s my lack of interpersonal skills. Man, thinking about this is depressing. I’m regretting having been born...

Negative thoughts started spiraling out of control, and my mood plummeted like a rock.

“Oops, we should stop here. We’ve got an entrance ceremony coming up.” Miori interrupted my rumination after glancing at her watch.

“You’re right. We’ve got a long commute too,” I agreed. The school was five stops away by train, so it took about an hour to get there from my place.

“All righty, see you at school! Come on, let’s go home, Ku-chan!” Miori called to her dog who had been waiting by her feet patiently. She tugged on its leash and led it away.

My morning jog hadn’t gone as planned, but I was able to reconnect with a fellow middle school classmate. History was already changing.

I also headed home while I mulled over how differently things were going.

Back at home, I showered, ate breakfast, and changed into my uniform.

“Oh dear. You’ve become so handsome!”

I moved to the door as I tried to brush off my mom’s excessive praise. Lately, she had started praising me for every single thing I did, so much that I was starting to understand what nepotism—I mean, parental love—really meant.

I passed Namika on my way out. After three seconds of staring at me in my uniform, she whispered, “Have a nice day.”

“Thanks, you too.”

I rode my bike to the nearest station and got on the train. It was packed at this hour even though commuting by car was common in Gunma. I figured Miori would have taken either this train or the previous one, but I didn’t spot her in the crowd. *What would I do if I found her? It’s not like we’re close enough to walk to school together.*

Man, I remember taking the train to get to school every day. Really makes me feel like I’m a high schooler again. I smiled bitterly because I always used to ride the train with dead fish eyes.

Then, I felt someone watching me, and I glanced to my left. My eyes met a girl in the same brand-new uniform that I was wearing. I immediately turned away. *She looked a little flushed, so I don’t think she was glaring at me. Her uniform is from Ryomei, like mine.*

If I were an outgoing person, I would’ve struck up a conversation right then and there, but I didn’t have the courage. It was my policy to act cautiously and only make a move once I was fully prepared. In RPG lingo, I was the type of person who not only overleveled, but also attacked carefully. I didn’t used to be like this, but my failure in high school had likely influenced the change in my personality.

The train finally arrived while I was thinking of trivial things. It was only a five-minute walk from the station to the school. I still had plenty of time before the

entrance ceremony would begin.

Cherry blossom trees lined the path to the school. Many students wearing my same uniform were walking underneath the picturesque full blossoms.

Someone among them caught my eye.

“Ah...” I uttered without thinking. It was a girl who was smiling and walking in the middle of a group of six. She had shoulder-length flaxen hair, which I knew was her natural color. Her face was stunningly gorgeous. And yet, she had an air of angelic innocence to her.

I wasn't the only one staring. She was turning the heads of many on their way to school.

Her name was Hoshimiya Hikari. She was the type of girl who made the beautiful, blooming cherry blossoms look like mere supporting actors. In the past, I had fallen for Hoshimiya, confessed to her...and subsequently been rejected. I still hadn't gotten over those feelings and continued to think about Hoshimiya even after seven years had passed.

Her smile was exactly the same as I remembered. Of course it would be! My racing heart only reaffirmed my feelings for her.

Up until now, I'd kept telling myself that I wanted to experience a happy youth full of color. It was a vague ambition that lacked clear direction, but now I had one concrete goal.

I want Hoshimiya to like me. I want to date her this time.

Our eyes met for a moment. However, we were still just strangers right now. I averted my gaze so I wouldn't seem weird. She was still looking at me when I glanced at her again, and our eyes met once more.

Oh crap. She must have been thinking the same thing I was. We both awkwardly looked forward.

“Hikari? What's the matter?”

“It's nothing. Nothing at all. Oh, look, we're here!”

Weird. Something like this happened on the train too. I keep making eye contact with people. This didn't happen in the past. I feel like people are staring

at me. Is there something strange about me?

I took out my hand mirror while I walked and checked myself out. *Hmm, I look fine.* My hair was done properly and my uniform fit was just loose enough to be fashionable, but not sloppy-looking.

What is it, then? I finally arrived at school while I was racking my brain.

I walked towards the crowd of students right away to see what everyone was doing. They were gathered around bulletin boards where the class listings were posted. I remembered what class I had been in, but I figured I'd double-check just in case.

Let's see... Oh, there I am—first year, class two, Haibara Natsuki. Hoshimiya's name was also listed. We'd been in the same class for the first two years of high school last time. So far, things were still the same this time around.

I happened to see Miori's name listed under the class next to mine, class one—also the same as last time. I gave the rest of the list a quick skim to check if everything looked familiar, and it seemed to match my memories.

I couldn't recall every person's name off the top of my head, but I would recognize a name and think, *Oh yeah, that guy.* I even recognized quite a number of faces in the crowd.

"Ah! Look, over there! Yaaay! Rei, Tatsu, we're all in the same class!" A loud voice rang out from behind me over all the clamor.

"You don't have to yell. I can hear you."

"Come on. Uta can't help being hyped up; she's a high schooler now."

I turned around to see a group of three students from the same middle school talking to each other. I remembered them, and it wasn't just a faint recollection. In fact, I knew a lot about them. They were the first group of people that I had mingled with. These three were the center of class 1-2. They were at the top of the social ladder, the popular kids—in other words, the position I had yearned for the most.

"Tatsu, you're happy too! Why're you trying to act cool?" The loud girl currently yelling over the crowd was Sakura Uta. Her petite frame fluttered here

and there, clearly expressing her joy. She was a cheerful and energetic girl, and she had a cute face to boot. Watching her overflow with energy was enough to warm anyone's heart.

"Huh? Why would I get worked up like you?" The deep-voiced boy who was rebuffing her with a blatant scowl was Nagiura Tatsuya. He was taller than me, with a solid build. His features were well-defined, though his eyes had a mean edge to them which gave off a wild impression.

Nagiura looked like a scary but still handsome guy, if I had to sum it up. In reality, he just hated being underestimated more than anything. He was actually an upbeat and nice guy.

"Tatsuya, you're such a tsundere. That's not in right now, you know." The boy teasing Nagiura in a mellow tone was Shiratori Reita. He was attractive, with fine features that gave off the exact opposite vibes from Nagiura. Unlike Nagiura, who might have been attractive to some, Shiratori was attractive to everyone; his presence captivated the gazes of all the girls nearby. He was a gentle and affable person, as well as a great leader.

When I'd been planning my high school debut, the guy closest to the ideal image that I had been striving for was Shiratori.

"Were tsundere boys ever popular?" Uta asked.

"Oh, Uta. Your knowledge of shojo manga is lacking," Shiratori replied.

"Stop using words I've never heard of. What even is that?" Nagiura barked back.

"Oh right, Tatsu doesn't read manga," Uta threw in.

"Stop belittling me! I've read some *Two Piece* before."

"Only 'cause I lent it to you. You don't own a single manga," Shiratori said with a shrug.

Nagiura snorted. "Shut up! Basketball is all I need anyway."

At that moment, Shiratori caught me watching their spectacle. "Oh, sorry. Are these two being too loud?"

I was shaken for a moment; this hadn't happened the first time around. But I

managed to keep my cool and respond normally. “Oh, no. Not at all. I was just thinking the three of you sure are close.”

Did I stare too much? The day’s barely begun and I’ve already misplayed! It was such a familiar sight that I couldn’t help but watch.

“That’s because the three of us are from the same middle school. Are you in class 1-2 as well?” Shiratori asked me amicably. He was completely clueless about my inner turmoil.

I know, I wanted to say. Nor would it have been hard to guess what class they were in since they’d been standing in front of the posting for class 1-2 for so long.

“Yeah. I’m Haibara Natsuki. Nice to meet you.”

“I’m Shiratori Reita. The short one here is Sakura Uta, and the tall one is Nagiura Tatsuya.”

Nagiura and Sakura turned in my direction when they heard themselves being introduced. I didn’t think they noticed, but I was trembling a little. Nagiura’s gaze was especially intimidating.

“Hey, Natsuki? Sorry, man, but I can’t stick up for you anymore. Besides, you piss me off.” I recalled the moment Nagiura had said those words to me. After all, he’d been the one who forced me to face my mistakes, the one who had started it all. He hadn’t done anything wrong; it was all my fault for being socially inept. Even though I was well aware of that fact, the trauma left within my heart wouldn’t disappear so easily.

I still had nightmares of that day.

“Already made a new friend, Reita? Of course you did,” Nagiura said.

“I was just saying hi since he’s in the same class as us.” While they talked, I took the opportunity to calm my breathing. I saw Nagiura give me a once-over. He stared hard, examining me from head to toe.

“Hey, you. You’ve got some good muscle on you. What did you play?” Nagiura asked after his examination.

“Play, like in a club? I wasn’t in a club in middle school.”

“What, for real? But you’re so fit.”

“True. You do look like an athlete.” Shiratori nodded in agreement. I was glad that my bodybuilding had paid off.

“I got into lifting weights and stuff recently. I’m glad to hear it’s paid— What?!” I jumped in surprise. Someone was giving my stomach a pat down. I immediately looked down to see short little Sakura there. She had somehow crept up close enough to touch me.

“Wow! You’ve got a six-pack!” she marveled.

“You surprised me...” *Are cheery people always so touchy? Oh yeah, Sakura doesn’t think twice about physical contact with boys, so she’s easily misunderstood. She had zero interest in romance but people kept confessing to her. And she shot them all down. A nasty trait to have.*

“Listen carefully, Uta. You’re not supposed to touch someone’s stomach without permission the first time you meet them,” Shiratori warned her with a sigh.

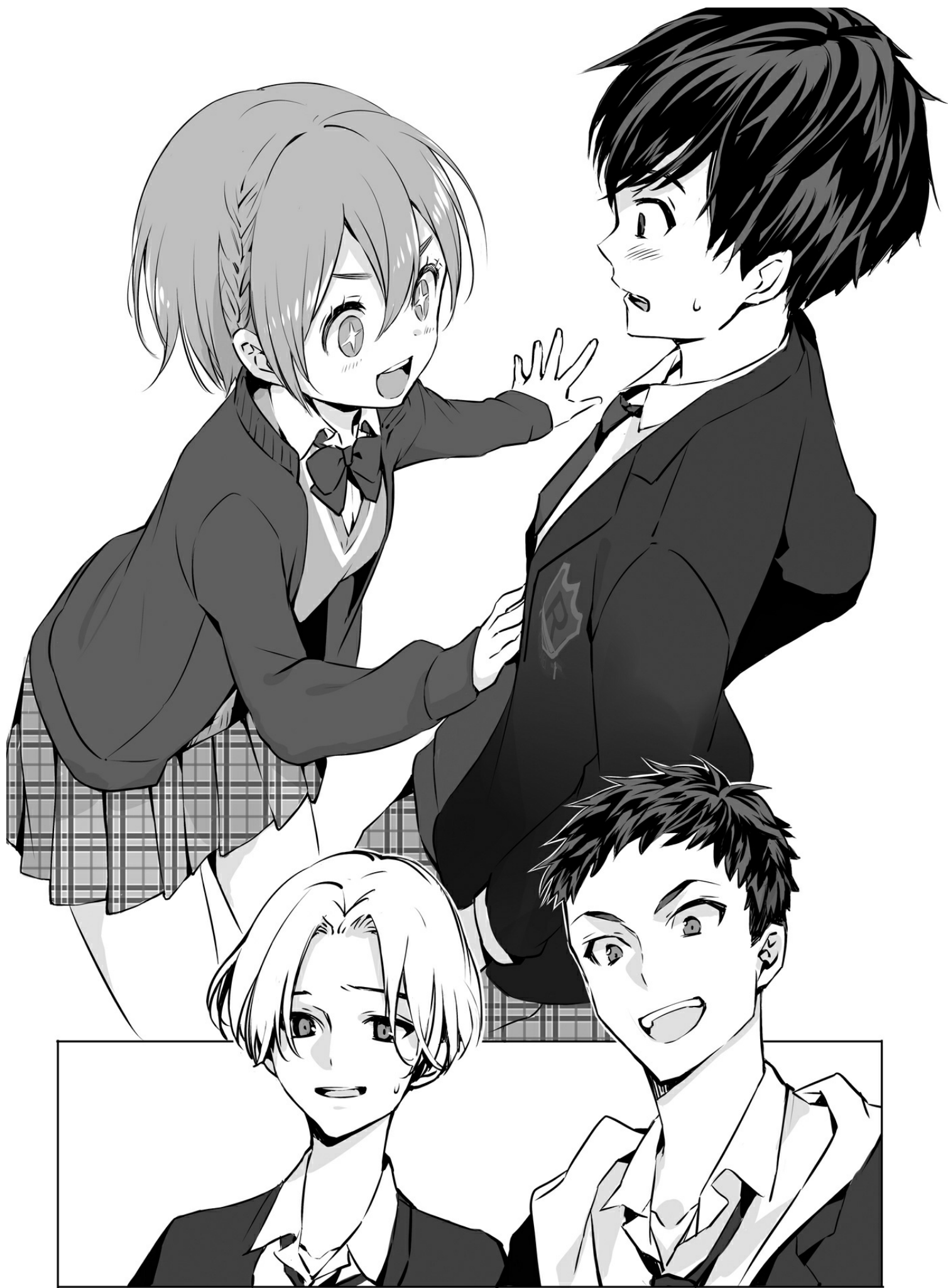
“Really? I’m sorry.”

“It’s no big deal. I was just a little surprised.”

“Anyway, it’s crazy! You’re as ripped as Tatsu!” she blurted out.

“What?! You’re on par with me?!” Nagiura exclaimed.

“No way. That’s impossible. The difference between us is clear as day.” I shook my head vigorously. I was relatively confident in the results of my training, but in the end it had only been one month of working out. I would definitely lose when compared to Nagiura. He was both taller and better built than me.



I was, at most, buffer than the slender Shiratori.

“Oh, yeah. Reita introduced me already but I’ll say it again. I’m Nagiura Tatsuya.”

“I’m Sakura Uta! Call me Uta!”

“I’m Haibara Natsuki. You can call me Natsuki. Nice to meet you.”

I’ll copy how friendly Sakura—I mean, Uta—is and have people call me Natsuki. It’ll feel like we’re closer if they’re not calling me by my surname. Getting the vibes right is important.

“All right, then. Natsuki, you can call me Tatsuya.”

“Same here. Call me Reita.”

The two of them joined in, going with the flow. *Doesn’t this mean we’re already closer than last time? Even though I’d wanted to call them Tatsuya, Reita, and Uta in the past, I held off.* Last time, only Nagiura knew me as Natsuki—and that had stopped midway through the first year.

“Got it. Tatsuya, Reita, and Uta... Great to meet you.”

I felt like my voice would become weak and timid if I wasn’t careful, but I managed to stay strong all the way through. Undaunted by their powerful, sunny auras, I used my own skill: “Refreshing Smile.” *Take this! I practiced hard so that my smile won’t look gloomy anymore!*

“Okay, now that introductions are out of the way, we should get going,” Reita said.

“Yeah, the entrance ceremony is starting soon.” Tatsuya nodded.

“Whaaat? Listening to adults is so boring,” Uta complained.

“That’s not a reason to skip it,” Tatsuya scolded her.

“Tatsu, don’t act like an honor student when you look like a delinquent!” she shot back.

“Are you trying to piss me off?!”

My smile didn’t elicit any special response from them. *Right. I look better than*

before, but I'm still just slightly better looking than average, at best. People only react to refreshing smiles when a hot guy does it. It's their special privilege, after all.

After we sat through the snooze fest of an entrance ceremony, all the new students headed to our assigned classrooms.

I walked with Reita and company to our classroom, but my interactions were still uncomfortable and awkward. The three of them had gone to the same middle school, so they were already well acclimated to each other, whereas I felt like the odd one out.

It was only natural that I needed time to get to know them since we had only just met, but it was hard to close the distance when they were already good friends. The conversation always revolved around the three of them, with an occasional question directed my way. I kept all my replies lukewarm and inoffensive because I didn't know how much openness I could get away with. It wasn't bad, but it was definitely kinda weird.

Still, I was pretty much fine with it. Close bonds aren't built overnight, after all; awkward moods are only natural for first meetings. Suppose I panicked and tried to bulldoze my way in. I would surely fail just like I had the first time.

"Oh, here we are," Tatsuya said after seeing the sign for class 1-2. The four of us left the bustling hallway and entered our classroom. There were already tenish people inside. A piece of paper was stuck to the blackboard, most likely our seat assignments.

"Wh-Whoa. Isn't that girl super cute?!" Uta tugged on my shirt, pulling my attention away from the blackboard. I followed her gaze and saw the same unmatched beauty from earlier this morning.

"Oh, um, are you talking about me?" Hoshimiya Hikari asked, smiling uncomfortably.

The girl with long black hair sitting next to her giggled. "You heard 'super cute girl' and thought it was you? Self-aware much?"

That nasty comment came courtesy of Nanase Yuino. Nanase was plenty cute

herself, though her beauty was overshadowed by Hoshimiya's overwhelming radiance. Nanase had almond eyes, a prominent nose, and unblemished white skin. She was tall for a girl, and you could see that her legs were long and slim even while she was seated. Rather than cuteness, her overall slender build gave off an impression of grace and beauty.

"Th-That's because she was pointing *straight at me*," Hoshimiya refuted. She was bright red from Nanase calling her out.

"Yeah! I'm talking about you!" Uta exclaimed. In the blink of an eye, she'd run over to where the other two girls were sitting. Tatsuya sighed and trailed after her. Reita and I followed suit.

"Thought so! You're even cuter up close!" Uta continued.

"Um... Thank you?" Hoshimiya smiled uneasily, which only encouraged Uta to push her face in closer, cornering the poor girl against the window.

"So cute that I want to make you mine!"

"Um... N-No thank you?"

"Okay, that's enough, Uta. You're scaring her." Reita grabbed his friend by the shoulder and pried her away from her victim.

Whoa! I knew they were close, but he's so casual about touching a girl, I caught myself thinking like a loser.

"But she's soooo cute," Uta grumbled, unruffled by Reita's touch.

"Ha ha, tell me about it. Hikari was the most popular girl in our middle school too," Nanase teased.

"Yuino-chan, don't put it like that! I'm not an idol or anything," Hoshimiya said, flustered.

"Wow!" Uta marveled at that fun fact. "Oh, so you two are from the same middle school?"

"Yep," answered Nanase. "We went to Kasai Middle School. What about you guys?"

"We're from Ojima Middle School! Oh, all of us besides Natsu, I mean. Right,

Natsu?” Uta’s question suddenly dragged me right into the spotlight of the conversation. Being subjected to the gazes of five intimidatingly attractive people unnerved me.

“Yeah. I went to Mizumi Middle School. It’s kinda far from here,” I answered.

“Mizumi. Is that near Takasaki?” Reita asked.

“Yeah. Well, not exactly, but it’s pretty close to Takasaki.” Ryomei High School was located in Maebashi, Gunma’s capital, so most students were from middle schools in the vicinity, such as Ojima and Kasai. I wasn’t surprised nobody knew where Mizumi Middle School was because it was even farther out than Takasaki. My town was sometimes referred to as the boonies, and I’d agree with that.

“Do you take the train, then?” Reita asked politely.

“Yeah. Thankfully, Ryomei is close to the station.”

“I know, right!” Nanase agreed. “It’s basically right in front of the station. Hikari and I also take the train.”

“We ride our bikes to school since the three of us live pretty close.” Tatsuya joined in.

“Makes sense.” Nanase nodded.

Thinking that I wasn’t familiar with the area, Reita quickly added, “Ojima is especially close to Ryomei, around five minutes away by bicycle.”

“Oh, really? That sounds super nice. I’m jealous!” I pretended like it was my first time hearing that information. *Back then, I hadn’t known this either. I should try to adhere to how much I knew when I first entered high school.*

“Hey, hey! What’re your names?” Uta asked. “I can kinda guess from what you called each other but I wanted to ask. Just in case!” Finally, she came up with a normal question!

“Oh, good point. I’m Hoshimiya Hikari—”

“The school’s number one beauty!” Nanase interjected teasingly. “My hobbies are reading and watching movies, and I was in the literature club in middle school.”

“Yeah. Wait, no! I’m not a beauty!” Hoshimiya grabbed her friend’s arm in protest.

“Isn’t it kinda impossible for you to *not* be a beauty?” I accidentally said my thoughts aloud. *Oh, crap!*

Hoshimiya blinked at me a few times in surprise and then hung her head from embarrassment. “Th-Thanks,” she stammered.

“Oh, uh, no! Sorry, my thoughts just slipped out,” I fumbled back at her. The atmosphere had become awkward—all because of me. *Another misplay. I really need to up my game.*

Something crossed my mind while I was scolding myself. *Wait, Hoshimiya’s reaction was weird.* I’d said similar words to her in my original time, but back then she had only shot me a strained smile in response.

“Ooh? Hikari’s flustered! But I thought you were used to being praised as a beauty!” Nanase teased again.

“Cut it out, Yuino-chan! I’m going to get angry!”

“Okay, okay. I’m Nanase Yuino. Hikari and I went to the same middle school. We’re besties!”

“Yep! Heh heh, we’re best friends!” Hikari chimed in. Hearing the phrase “besties” from Nanase immediately quelled her anger. *Hoshimiya is unexpectedly simpleminded, huh?* I found myself thinking.



The rest of us introduced ourselves one by one, but as I was about to take my turn, our teacher entered the classroom and started homeroom. We were all treated to a combination pep talk and lecture about the importance of being a high schooler or whatever.

Afterwards, it was more self-introductions, this time by seating order and up in front of the class. *Oh yeah, I thought, this happened last time too.* I didn't want to do anything dumb and make a laughingstock of myself, so I played it safe and introduced myself normally like everyone else. Going through this process again triggered flashes of my original, cringey self-intro to plague my mind.

"I'm Haibara Natsuki! My hobbies are reading and watching movies. I'm gonna join the basketball club. Oh, my dream is to make one hundred friends! I really want to get to know you all! Nice to meetcha!"

Stop! Stop! Get out of my head! The flashback made me want to keel over and roll around on the ground. But if I did that now, I would be writing a new page of shame in my book of dark histories.

I'll need to face my dark past if I want to redo my adolescence. I continued to think such profound thoughts until homeroom ended. Ha, just like a philosopher.

After homeroom, new students were free to go once we bought our textbooks. The six of us headed out to buy them together.

Well, I thought, things are playing out very differently from last time. I didn't hang out with these guys at this point in time. Nor were Reita, Uta, and Tatsuya friends with Hoshimiya and Nanase. I think. Probably?

Did my actions affect everyone else somehow? There are probably no other factors that would change history besides me, so it's gotta be me. Of course, it would've been a different story if other people had traveled through time. But there were endless possibilities if I started going down that rabbit hole.

"Aaah! Textbooks are sooo heavy!" Uta groaned as she lugged her bundle of books.

“C’mon, you’re kidding, right? Aren’t you too weak to join the basketball club, then?” Tatsuya scoffed.

Peeved by Tatsuya’s provocation, Uta made a complete one-eighty and toughed it out. “This is nothing!” she exclaimed.

“They really are heavy, though.” Nanase took a breath and then turned to her bestie. “Hikari, you okay there?”

“Aha...ha.” Hoshimiya tried to laugh, but she was too out of breath. “I’m not sure I can make it home carrying these.” Her slender arms were trembling. She didn’t look like she worked out at all, which made sense given she’d belonged to the literature club. “I think they’ll be easier to carry once I put them in my bag, but it’s hard to hold them all in my arms.”

I hesitated and then said, “Hoshimiya, want me to hold them if they’re too heavy for you?” I held my books under my left arm and offered my right hand to her.

Hoshimiya blinked up at me for a moment. “Wow, Haibara-kun, you’re strong.”

“Call me Natsuki. This is nothing much.”

“Um, th-then, Natsuki-kun. I’d feel bad if you carried them all, so will you take half?”

“Okay.” In my mind, I pumped my fist in glee due to how smoothly I’d gotten her to call me by my name. I assured her in a deliberately lighthearted tone that the books weren’t heavy and took half of hers in my right arm.

This is pretty heavy, I grunted internally. I’d just put up a front when I said the books were light, but I continued acting as if they weighed as much as a feather. *It’s all to get close to Hoshimiya. You could even say I worked out to get close to Hoshimiya!*

Reita took half of Nanase’s textbooks as well after seeing what I did for Hoshimiya. Tatsuya and Uta made eye contact, glared at each other, and then turned away with a huff. *Are those two close or not? Well, it’s probably fine. Uta’s in the basketball club so she should be plenty capable in spite of her height.*

And so, I carried Hoshimiya's textbooks all the way back to her desk. I really pushed myself; not only were the books bulky and heavy, but there were so dang many of them.

"Carrying all these books home is basically a workout!" I said. "Screw it, I'll just leave them in my locker."

"I wish we could," Reita said. "But won't they get mad if we leave our textbooks at school?"

"It's fine! It's fine! We have to bring them back to school anyway. They're just bricks in our bags," Tatsuya said with a shrug.

"Oh, so you're not planning on studying at home?" Nanase asked with a demeaning grin.

"Doesn't matter. I'll figure it out when class starts," Tatsuya replied.

Nanase looked up at him, about to shut his devil-may-care attitude down. But she stopped herself and sighed. "Hikari, don't let these delinquents corrupt you."

"What? Who's a delinquent? Are you talking about Natsuki-kun and Tatsuya-kun?" Hoshimiya asked, puzzled.

"Who're you calling a delinquent?" I bantered.

Smooth one! Remember, enter the conversation with confidence, just like this. I made a mental note of that sensation.

I'd made it past the first hurdle and joined the cheerful, popular kids of the class. Next on the agenda would have to be firmly establishing my position. I had failed at this step last time around. Right now, our group was composed of three subgroups: Reita, Uta, and Tatsuya; Hoshimiya and Nanase; and me by myself. I needed to build up a relationship with each person individually, or else I would soon be isolated.

"But you know, I wasn't ready for high school textbooks to be this massive." Hoshimiya flipped through the book for Math 1A. "Whoa... I don't understand any of this either! I'm starting to get worried."

"Don't worry; it'll be fine. You'll get it if you pay attention during class,"

Tatsuya said optimistically.

“I don’t know about that. Ryomei may not be number one in the prefecture, but it’s still quite renowned. Most students who graduate go on to high-ranking universities,” Reita warned.

He was right; the tests at this school were very difficult. Although I had gone through all the classes once before, I would still need to review and study up. Furthermore, this was an academically oriented school, which meant one of the best ways to show off my specs would be to have good grades.

I hadn’t been gifted with athletic prowess, a sidesplitting sense of humor, or talent in the arts. That’s why I wanted to excel in academics, at the very least. Plus, I had seven whole years worth of extra experience.

While in college, I’d majored in science and actually been pretty diligent about studying, albeit secretly so no one would know. So that was four years of beating science and math into my brain. The bigger problem would be the humanities.

“Don’t worry! Tatsu is here so at least you won’t be last in the class!” Uta reassured her.

“Hey! I may be an idiot, but I’d never lose to you! Never.”

As usual, seeing Uta and Tatsuya butt heads made Reita sigh and step in. “Good grief. Stop fighting, you guys. You’re both around the same level anyway, so you look silly bickering about it. It’s unsightly.”

“You didn’t have to say it!” Reita’s scathing remark made Uta wail out in shock.

I had been thinking the same thing. *Man, this guy looks nice and eloquent but his words sting.* In my past, I’d only known Tatsuya and Uta through the basketball club, and I hadn’t been close to Reita at all. It was somehow refreshing to see this side of him. *So this is what he’s like.*

“Shiratori-kun, does that mean you’re good at studying?” Nanase asked.

“Well, better than those two, at least. I doubt I can beat you, though,” Reita replied.

“Oh? What makes you think that?”

“I can tell that you’re smart. Am I right, Hoshimiya-san?”

“Yep, Yuino-chan was always ranked number one at our school!” Hoshimiya confirmed.

“Ranked number one?! That’s crazy!” I joined in the conversation with exaggerated surprise. I actually had been surprised, but I made sure to play it up a little. *My normal reaction is too boring, I reasoned. I need to overreact a bit if I want to be a cool kid. At least, according to my analysis, anyway.*

“That’s right! Yuino-chan is super smart!” Hoshimiya bragged.

“Hikari, why are you acting so proud? Speaking of which, what rank were you? Sixtieth?” Nanase added, getting in a sarcastic dig as always.

“We don’t need to talk about me!”

“That’s unexpectedly average...” I murmured.

“Why do you have to be so brutally honest? Stop that!” she joked with me.

I was secretly over the moon at how Hoshimiya had retorted playfully to my teasing. *It’s hard to tell how close we are, but I think it’s going well. Right?*

“If you’re gonna talk like that, then what about you, Natsuki? What was your rank?” Tatsuya threw his arm around me and rested his weight there.

Do you have to put your arm on my shoulder just to ask me that? I caught myself being negative again; I truly was an introvert through and through! *I need to get used to how pushy jock types can be.*

“Who, me? My grades weren’t bad.”

“Well, yeah. If they were, you wouldn’t have gotten into Ryomei in the first place,” said Tatsuya.

My middle school grades, huh? How were they? About average, I think. But I wanted to go to Ryomei specifically for my high school debut, so I studied like crazy to get in.

“I worked really hard before the exams and somehow made it in.”

“Oh, then you’re just like me!” Tatsu crowed.

“Me too! Yaaay, one of us!” Uta cheered.

She raised her hand up in front of my face, confusing me for a second until I realized she wanted a high five. As soon as I put my hand up, Uta slapped my palm loudly. She had to do a little hop because she was so short. *She’s kinda like a cute little cat*, I thought.

“Ah, that’s my mom.” Hoshimiya was looking at her phone. “I need to head home,” she said. With that, we all dispersed.

My mom was also waiting for me since she’d attended the parent information session after the entrance ceremony. She drove me home, and we had yakiniku together on the way. It was delicious!

The next day, classes kicked off without delay. Since it was the first day of the regular curriculum, all the teachers kept the atmosphere lax and spent the time introducing themselves and going over the syllabus. It was easy but also a drag. It took all of my focus to fight the urge to sleep.

After school, the six of us found that we grouped up again naturally. I took a look around to see what the rest of my classmates were up to. Similar to us, the other students were forming their own groups, with some kids biding their time and waiting for a chance to talk to somebody. Meanwhile, those who didn’t care to make friends had left the classroom as soon as the day ended. Quite the hodgepodge of reactions.

Last time around, I’d been so self-centered that I only paid attention to myself, but this time I was enjoying observing other students. There were maybe five cliques being formed in our classroom, though the atmosphere was still awkward.

Our group definitely stands out the most. How do I put it? Our aura is just in a different league. Besides me, of course.

After all, these five insanely attractive teens just oozed glamor and charisma. The other groups of students were even sneaking glances in our direction. You could tell by their eyes that they wanted to talk to us. *Well, I bet it’s also because we’re the only group with boys and girls right now. They’re jealous that*

we've got girls and guys from the get-go. I get it; I totally do!

I felt a strange sense of superiority from being a part of this group, but at the same time I also felt like I was the odd one out. At any moment, someone might ask, "Why is a nobody like you hanging out with them?" *I'd have no comeback if anyone said that to my face. I'm trying to become a cheerful popular kid and all, but is it really okay for me to be hanging out with these guys?*

"Hey, Natsuki? What're you zoning out for?" Tatsuya's deep voice snapped me out of my worries and brought me back to reality. Getting lost in the depths of my own thoughts was a bad habit of mine.

"Oh, sorry. It's nothing," I said.

"You sure? We're going to check out the clubs. You're coming too, right?" he asked. All five of them were looking at me.

"Of course," I said with a nod.

"I'm thinking we should take a look at all the clubs that are meeting right now. Does that sound good?" Reita asked, skimming through the club leaflet that the teacher had passed out earlier. We all nodded in agreement.

It's incredible how easily he takes the wheel in times like this, I thought to myself. *I want to be like him! I can't learn everything by reading articles on the internet, but I have the perfect role model right here. Better pay attention.*

"Cool. Let's start with the cultural clubs," Reita said.

We started with the third floor since many of the culture clubs met there. And of course, tons of freshmen were walking around the hallways to check them out just like us.

"It's really crowded up here," Hoshimiya murmured. I'd been thinking much the same.

"The clubs are allowing open observation for the whole week," Reita explained. "This is only day one, so all of the first-years are checking them out to decide which club to join. I mean, we're doing the same thing."

All of the clubs were trying to be as welcoming as possible, going so far as to

set up chairs for new students to sit and observe from.

“We should explore the school while we’re at it!” Uta suggested. “We’re already walking around anyway!” And so, we decided to tour the school grounds while also dropping by any cultural clubs that caught our eye.

Some clubs set up hands-on activities for new students to try. The calligraphy club encouraged its guests to not only watch, but to also try their hand at the art. All of us declined, except for Nanase who quickly drew beautiful letters. She also displayed flawless etiquette at the tea ceremony club. The rest of us gawked in amazement at her skills, causing her to avert her eyes.

“I just learned a bit when I was younger,” Nanase said.

“You’re way too good for ‘a bit’ of learning,” I scoffed.

“Yuino-chan has taken lots of lessons for all sorts of things!” Hoshimiya puffed up pridefully for some reason.

“I only ever wanted tutoring and piano lessons. My parents piled the rest on,” Nanase explained.

“You can play the piano too? And you were ranked number one on top of that? Awesome! You’re a genius, seriously!” Tatsuya shuddered, in awe and perhaps a bit of fear.

I felt the same way. *I knew her grades were crazy good in high school, but I didn’t know she did all this extra stuff too. She’s like a real-life Yamato Nadeshiko—that classic type of ideal Japanese woman. Wait a sec... Can I even show off with grades if Nanase is around? Nah, of course I can. I just have to score higher than her. I have seven years on her! So, of course I can...right?*

“Would you say piano is your forte?” Reita asked her.

“Yes. I’m not joining a club because I plan to devote myself to piano in high school,” Nanase replied bluntly.

“What club were you in during middle school?”

“I was a member of the Japanese archery club in name only. I didn’t show up much because of my lessons.”

“Man, Japanese archery? That really matches your image.” I threw my

unfiltered thoughts out there. Normally, I was the type to keep things to myself, but according to “Tips for a Successful High School Debut,” it was best to be assertive and speak up. Apparently it made you feel easy to talk to.

“I know, right!” said Uta.

“I get what you mean.” Tatsuya also agreed with me. Their reactions were exactly as I’d intended.

“Yuino-chan looks sooo cool in her archery uniform!” Hoshimiya bragged. “Wanna see a pic?” She immediately took her phone out.

“You have pictures?! Lemme see, lemme see!” Uta exclaimed.

“H-Hold on! Hikari, stop!” Nanase protested.

Uta was the first to jump to Hoshimiya’s side to look. The rest of us swarmed around too. *It’s kinda cute to see Nanase rattled.*

“Yuino-chan, normally you’re the one teasing me. Consider this payback! ♪” Hoshimiya laughed deviously.

She then joyfully showed the rest of us dozens of pictures of Nanase. However, partway through we realized we were blocking the hallway and scrambled to relocate elsewhere.

“Oh! I want to take a quick look at the literature club. You know, I was part of the literature club in middle school,” Hoshimiya remembered.

“Got it.” Reita checked the leaflet. “Looks like they’re next to the library.”

“Hikarin, are you set on joining them in high school too?” Uta asked.

When did you come up with that weird nickname? I wondered.

“Hmm, it depends on the atmosphere. I’m happy to join but I’m fine not joining too.”

We stopped by the wind ensemble club since it was on the way and then visited the literature club. There were around ten boys and girls reading books or working on their laptops. It was a calm environment, but I noticed that they seemed unsettled. Perhaps because they had to leave the door open for new students to observe their activities. Not only that, but our group was especially

conspicuous and a magnet for stares.

The literature club members reminded me of my old self, meaning they were meek-looking people. *Man, this feels awkward. And I bet they're thinking the same thing. Uta and Tatsuya especially don't give off the impression that they read books for fun.*

"Hello. Can we observe?" Hoshimiya asked with a dazzling smile. She was undaunted by the awkward atmosphere.

"Y-Yes. By all means," one of the club members, most likely the club president, responded. The rest of the members were too enraptured to say anything. And with that, the awkward atmosphere vanished.

"This is the literature club, right?" Hoshimiya asked.

"Y-Yes. Wait. Huh? Oh, that's right. You're all freshmen, right?" he managed to fumble out.

"Aha ha. That's right. All of us are freshmen," Hoshimiya responded. Her tone was serene and infectious. "Wow, there're a lot of members."

"Everyone's in attendance today due to the club fair. Normally there are about three or four people at our meetings since members are free to show up when they like. Except when we have important events coming up, like publishing our club journal."

"Is this everyone, then?" she asked.

"Yep. Oh, well, we're missing one. I think they went to the bathroom."

"I see. So there are eleven members total. By the way, how many times do you meet each week?"

The probably-club-president was a boy with glasses, and he was clearly lovestruck by Hoshimiya already. He continued to share details about the club. All the while, Hoshimiya would smile and skillfully respond with little questions or affirmations to keep the conversation going.

Her conversational skills are something else! She can adapt to anyone and keep the ideas flowing. As expected of the school's number one beauty, Hoshimiya Hikari. She's a natural extrovert. I've heard before that a true

extrovert can interact with introverts without any issue.

In my previous time, after my high school debut had flopped and everyone hated me, Hoshimiya still spoke to me occasionally as if nothing was wrong. She talked to everyone, though, not just me, so I hadn't misunderstood her kindness.

"Hey, I feel like we're makin' it awkward here so let's wait outside," Tatsuya suggested while scratching his head. He was unexpectedly adept at reading the atmosphere, given his brusque personality.

No, not "unexpectedly." He wouldn't be one of the popular kids if he couldn't read between the lines. Tatsuya might look like just some jock, but he's also thinking before he acts. Well, maybe he's not thinking, but he's good at sensing the atmosphere. I guess it's his extrovert instincts. Whatever he has, I certainly don't have it.

"You're right." Uta nodded, being uncharacteristically quiet. The rest of us went outside and idly chatted with each other in the hallway while we waited for Hoshimiya. She came back out to join us in under three minutes.

"Done already?" Reita asked.

"Yeah. We have a lot more time to sit in on clubs, so I'll think it over at my own pace. They were all really nice, and I can drop by anytime. Their club meets twice a week, and attendance isn't mandatory, which is perfect for me."

"Wow, lib arts clubs are really chill," Tatsuya marveled.

"The literature club is especially relaxed since the only thing they do besides reading is publishing the club journal," Hoshimiya explained. "Other clubs meet only two or three times a week too. Sports clubs are the ones that are fundamentally different."

"True," said Tatsuya. "The basketball club meets seven times a week; they even let me join over spring break."

"Oh yeah, I heard! The girls' team doesn't start until after the entrance ceremony, though!" Uta added her piece.

"Wait, then shouldn't you be at practice right now?" I asked.

Tatsuya scratched his head a few times. “They probably won’t get mad if I skip the first day of practice.” He hesitated. “Right?”

“Don’t ask me.” I shrugged. Just then, I could feel Reita staring at me for some reason. I turned towards him. “Hm? We’re looking at the sports clubs next, right? Let’s get a move on!”

He gave me a look. “Yeah. The gym is a bit far, so let’s start with the clubs that are outside.”

I feel like he just shot me a weird look. Was it my imagination?

Everyone followed Reita to our next destination, and I tagged along.

We saw clubs for baseball, tennis, soccer, and plenty more as we walked around outside. Not only did Ryomei High excel in academics, but it also had a robust sports program. Teams were practicing in earnest everywhere we looked. The soccer club had an especially large number of members; apparently, it was a powerhouse in the district.

“Reita, you’re going to join the soccer club, right?” I asked.

“That’s what I’m planning.” He nodded.

“Rei, shouldn’t you say hello, then? Look at all the people!” Uta exclaimed.

“I’ve known most of them since I was in middle school. I’ll save the hellos for after I join.”

“You know them already? No way they all went to your middle school, though,” I wondered aloud.

“I’m the only one from Ojima that’s joining the team, but most of us are from the same district, so we’ve played practice matches against each other. We’re all pretty close.”

I was dumbfounded by how nonchalantly he could say that. *Do people normally get close through practice matches? Oh, I see! Making friends for him is just that easy.*

Before I could go on another negative feels trip, a group of freshmen

watching the soccer club called out to Reita.

“Yo, if it isn’t Shiratori! I didn’t know you were going to this school!”

“Hey, it’s Ojima’s captain! You’re joining the soccer club too, yeah?”

“What’s up! Long time no see! Do you remember me?!”

Unfazed by the trio yelling at him, Reita replied without missing a beat. “Oh, hey, it’s the Clown Trio of Fuji Middle. It’s been a while.”

“Who’re you calling a clown?!”

“This guy’s the only clown here!”

“Only clowns call other people clowns.”

“I was keeping it on the down-low but I’m actually the one who started calling you three clowns,” Reita teased.

“What’d you say?!” the three of them yelled in harmony.

Wow, the delivery on that dis was so sharp and yet so gentle. Such skill! Reita truly is a bona fide extrovert, a pro at socializing. You, sir, have my respect.

“All right, my friends are waiting for me so I’ll talk to you guys some other time.” Reita ended the conversation seamlessly after a while.

Amazing! He didn’t forget about us and kept it short. Just as I thought, Shiratori Reita is closest to the ideal image I’ve been striving for. I’d better pay close attention and learn from his ways.

After that, we went to watch the teams that were practicing inside the gym. None of us had much interest in the ping-pong club or the volleyball club, so we quickly walked past them and headed straight for the boys’ and girls’ basketball clubs practicing on the back two courts.

Obviously, we were here because of Uta and Tatsuya.

Though Tatsuya had already joined the boys’ team, it was Uta’s first time seeing the girls’ team practice. She kept standing up from her chair, oohing and aahing, eyes twinkling with excitement.

“You’re like a little kid,” Hoshimiya chuckled.

“Grr, are you making fun of my height?!”

“Not exactly,” Hoshimiya said, still laughing.

“Then what?! Are you talking about my chest?! Listen up! I’m still growing, and I’m going to grow lots! The only way they can go is bigger. Got it? My boobs have infinite potential.” But Uta’s energy declined with each word.

“Why’re you the one getting down on yourself?” Tatsuya shot back. Uta was touching her own breasts while crumbling away. *I didn’t know she was sensitive about that. She is flat as a board, though.*

“Ah, um. Yeah! I think so too, Uta-chan!” Hoshimiya tried to cheer her up. However, Uta reproachfully stared at Hoshimiya’s two hefty mounds. She then nimbly got behind Hoshimiya and grasped the other girl’s breasts in her hands.

“Eek!” Hoshimiya yelped.

“Wow. Whoa. Mhm. Hm.” Uta felt her up while strange noises came out of her mouth.

“Haibara-kun, stop ogling! Turn around this instant,” Nanase admonished.

“S-Sorry!” I turned around obediently.

“You moron. You’re causing a scene.” Tatsuya berated Uta.

“Uta! Stop it,” Reita scolded.

Unlike me, Tatsuya and Reita were not forced to look away. Instead, they actively tore Uta off of Hoshimiya, without even a warning from the girls. *Oh, come on! Was I staring that hard? Well, I did think it was pretty...lewd.*

All the racket caught the basketball team’s attention. Tatsuya frantically bowed his head in apology for the noise.

“Nagiura! If you’re just gonna mess around then start practicing!” one of the members yelled.

“What?! Can’t you let me watch? It’s club observation week!”

“What’s the point in watching other clubs, huh?”

“W-Well, you got a point. Oh, but, I was actually just thinking of joining you guys on the court too! Really! I don’t need anything else but basketball. Wh-What?! Don’t glare at me like that!” Tatsuya tried to play it off, but his senpai wasn’t letting him off the hook. The rest of us looked at each other and laughed. It was a rare sight to see Tatsuya balking.

“Ah ha ha! Tatsu, you’re so uncool!” Uta cackled in delight.

In actuality, I was used to seeing Tatsuya like this. I’d also been in the basketball club, after all. No one had been tough on me like this, though, because I was a boring guy, not worth the effort of teasing. On the other hand, Tatsuya was an amusing target. That’s why he drew people in, even the upperclassmen.

“It’s your fault for skipping in the first place. You deserve a good scolding.” Reita shrugged.

Tatsuya left, running back to our classroom to change into gym clothes. It was funny how, at the end of the day, he was still getting roped into practice.

“Sorry, guys!” he yelled, already far off in the distance. The rest of us shared another laugh at the spectacle.

It was right then that I saw a familiar face enter the gym. We both let out a small “Ah!” when our eyes met. The other four turned around and followed my gaze.

“Miori,” I muttered. There, in front of the gym entrance, stood my so-called childhood friend. Of course I’d run into someone I didn’t want to see! Her smile grew wider and wider as she eyed the crowd around me.

Look at her expression! I knew she’d react like this. For crying out loud, please just don’t say anything!

“Heyo, Natsuki. Looks like things are going well, huh?”

“Oh, shush! Just keep it shut, please,” I snapped back.

“Wow, that’s sooo mean! Here I was worried about you too. Nah, just kidding; I wasn’t really.”

“Can you at least follow through if you’re going to lie?” *You’re hurting my*

feelings, you know! I'm as fragile as glass right now, I cried on the inside.

Miori had three other girls in tow. It seemed like she was also walking around looking at clubs with her friends.

"You know her?" Reita asked.

I nodded grudgingly. "Yeah, we went to the same middle school."

"Huh, you guys seem close."

"No, not rea—"

"Nope, we're not close at all. Not one bit!" Normally, I would have been the one denying it, but Miori covered for me this time. *Okay, I was going to deny it too, but did you really have to add so much emphasis? Come on!*

"Are you guys looking at clubs too?" Miori continued.

"Yeah. Oh, aren't you joining the basketball club?"

"That's the plan! I'm here to take a look."

"What, really?!" Uta jumped into the conversation, lively as ever. "I'm Sakura Uta! I'm also going to join the basketball club!"

"Really? Me too. I'm Motomiya Miori, from class one. Nice to meet you!"

"Yaaay!" They yelled happily and then high fived. *The cheerful types sure do become friends fast.*

"Wait. You *do* mean the girls' basketball team, right? Not becoming the manager of the boys' team or something?" Uta paused.

"No, no, Sakura-san, I'm joining the girls' team. I can't imagine you asking about anything *but* playing on the girls' team," Miori replied.

"Oh, good point! You're right! I like playing more than watching."

Miori chuckled. "I got those vibes from you."

"Really? Why?"

"It's because you're overflowing with energy, Uta. Anyone can tell," Reita said softly with a gentle smile. Uta tilted her head, still not really getting it, so Reita phrased it more bluntly for her. "Uta, you couldn't sit on the sidelines and

support a team if you tried.”

“Did you have to put it like that?!” Uta cried out in shock.

It had been funny, but Reita could only make those sorts of jabs at her because they were so close. It wasn’t something I could copy since I was poor at judging how close I was to others. *But I can’t just keep quiet. I can throw in a harmless comment every now and then. Miori being around makes it hard to talk, but I gotta do what I gotta do!*

“So, can you?” I asked Uta in an attempt to continue the topic.

“Hmm. I think being a manager would be impossible for me!”

“Yeah, I thought so.”

“You thought so?! Don’t say that! I could do it if I tried!”

I laughed. “That sort of stuff seems right up Reita’s alley, though.”

“Me? Well, unlike Uta, I do pay attention to the subtleties of people’s actions and needs.”

“Can you guys stop making fun of everything about me?!”

Miori giggled at Uta’s comedic overreaction. “You two are funny! So your name’s Reita-kun?”

“Yes, that’s right. Sorry, I haven’t introduced myself yet. I’m Shiratori Reita; nice to meet you.”

“I’m Miori! Can I call you Reita-kun? Also, you’re super hot!”

Uh, what the heck? She’s wasting no time at getting real friendly! That’s insane!

“Thanks. Can I call you Miori-chan? Or do you dislike when people use ‘chan’ with you?”

“I don’t mind, but you don’t need to add anything fancy!”

Wait, did she only say her name and not her surname so that he’d call her Miori? Also, isn’t she getting kinda close to him physically? She looks like she’s into him. Honestly, it’s understandable. There aren’t many guys, if any, in the school who can match Reita’s looks. He’s got an appearance that anyone can

appreciate, unlike Tatsuya who's got more of a wild feel to him. He looks like he could be the center of an idol group. I can picture him dancing already!

I let the two of them enjoy their chat and looked around. Hoshimiya and Nanase were conversing with the three girls who had come in with Miori. They were talking naturally, without any awkward silences.

Suddenly one of the girls, a blonde who looked like she had a fashion statement to make, hollered, "Miori, can we get going?"

"Oh, whoops! Okay! See you later, Reita-kun, Sakura-san!" Miori ran off to where her three friends were. But then she must have thought of something to say because she backtracked to where I was.

"Do you need something?" I asked, brows furrowed in displeasure by her return.

"I think your high school debut has been a success," Miori whispered in my ear.

"Just leave me alone!"

"Come on, don't be like that! I'm into Reita-kun, so help me out a bit."

"Ehh." My face wrinkled even more.

"In return, I'll help you out if anything ever happens." Miori smiled sweetly. With that, she ran back to her friends, without even waiting for my response. I hadn't agreed or disagreed, but she figured I'd accepted her proposal.

"You two really do get along," Reita mused.

"She's just the type of person that can be friendly with anyone."

"Ah, then she's like me. What did she say to you just now?"

I couldn't exactly tell Reita it had been about him. Nor did I want to mention my high school debut efforts; that'd be embarrassing!

"It was nothing. Just something from middle school," I replied with a nonchalant shrug in an attempt to avoid answering.

"I see," was all Reita said with a soft smile.

While we'd all been idling around chatting, Tatsuya had returned to the gym

and joined the basketball team's practice. The rest of us watched him, laughing as he got worked to the bone by his senpai.

I'm blending in just fine, I thought quietly. Miori's words from earlier echoed in my mind.

"I think your high school debut has been a success."

Well, if Miori says so, then at the very least things are going well right now. But the real test was just ahead. I was barely one step past the starting line. My actions from here on out would determine the color of my second high school life.

Chapter 2: Dreamlike Days

One week had passed since the entrance ceremony. It was a Friday in the middle of April, and I had finally gotten used to being a student. I wish I could have said that there'd been nothing *to* get used to since it was my second time going through high school, but I had forgotten so much, and every day was new and fresh.

The math teacher's monotonous voice echoed in the classroom. The spring breeze blowing in from the window felt wonderful. Each time I glanced around the room, another student had nodded off. *It's the sixth and final period of the day, so everyone must be pooped.*

"This problem will be your homework for today. We'll end class here," the math teacher said after seeing the time on the clock. And with perfect timing, the end-of-class bell rang.

"Yaaay, we're free!" Uta, who sat right in front of me, stretched her arms up into the air.

"You're such a ball of energy, Uta," I said with a yawn. She turned around and plopped her elbows on top of my desk.

"Tomorrow's the weekend! Finally! I've been waiting *forever*! I'm fed up with studying every single day! At last, I can spend all day playing basketball!" Uta exclaimed with as much hype as when she'd first joined the girls' basketball club.

"And then on Monday, classes will start again, and the cycle begins anew," Reita muttered from behind me as he packed up his books.

"Can you not burst my bubble right when I'm finally feeling happy?!" Uta grabbed her head, unable to handle the cruel truth he'd presented.

"Dude, you can't even practice tomorrow." Tatsuya broke the news to Uta from a few seats away. He looked at her with furrowed brows, confused as to why she was so excited.

Uta stared at him blankly. “What do you mean?”

“Weren’t you listening? There’s construction going on in the gym tomorrow so no clubs can practice,” he elaborated for her.

“Our teacher announced it during homeroom today.” Reita nodded.

“O-Oh yeah. I kinda remember that! B-But it’s okay; I can still practice today!” she said. I thought she would stay slumped over in grief, but she looked up and pumped her fists rambunctiously instead. “But this means I’ll have nothing to do over the weekend,” she realized. “What should I do?”

“Well, Uta-chan, would you like to hang out together?” Hoshimiya came out of nowhere with her same lovely smile and an invitation for Uta.

“Really? I’d love to! Let’s go! Whoo, I get to go on a date with Hikarin!”

“Why don’t we all hang out?” suggested Tatsuya. “I’ve got nothing to do either.”

“Whaaat?! No way! Tatsu, are you trying to get in the way of my date with Hikarin?”

“Now, now, Uta-chan. It’s rare for you both to be free on the weekends. Won’t it be more fun if we all go out together?” Hoshimiya reasoned.

Nanase walked over and said impassively, “If Hikari is going then I am too. I’m available on Saturday.” She started patting Hoshimiya on the head. Over the past week, I’d come to the realization that Nanase doted heavily on Hoshimiya.

Hoshimiya turned in my direction. For a moment I wondered what she wanted from me, until I realized she wanted to know if I had any plans over the weekend.

“I’m free too. I’m not in a club so I’m good for Saturday or Sunday,” I quickly replied.

Whew, that was close. I always assumed that no one would ever invite me out on the weekends, so I wasn’t going to speak up. This isn’t my original high school life—I need to stop letting those memories get to me!

“Then what about you, Reita-kun?” Hoshimiya asked.

Reita looked conflicted and crossed his arms. “I’ve got practice as normal this weekend, but I can hang out Saturday afternoon.”

The gym construction had put a hold on the sports clubs, but only the indoor ones. Reita was in the soccer club, so of course he still had practice.

“Oh yeah. Hoshimiya, do you have club activities over the weekends? You ended up joining the literature club, right?” Tatsuya asked.

She nodded. “I did, but we only meet twice a week on weekdays. I can always hang out on weekends. Well, I can’t go out *too much* or else my mom and Yuino-chan will get mad at me.”

“If I leave Hikari be, her grades will drop, and pronto! I have to keep my eye on her.” Nanase crossed her arms and sniffed haughtily.

That made Uta smile widely. “Ah ha ha, it’s like you have two moms!”

“Couldn’t you have called me her older sister instead?” Nanase pouted.

It’s cute when she drops her usual mature air and acts childish, I thought.

“All right, we can save the details for later. We have to finish cleaning the classroom or else,” Reita said.

After sixth period, students split into groups to clean the classroom. We each had our own duties such as sweeping the floor, taking out the trash, or wiping the blackboard. Our classmates had begun working while the six of us had been chatting. Our class was full of such good kids! The person on cleaning duty never had to badger anyone to clean.

We all heeded Reita’s suggestion and dispersed for the moment to attend to our chores.

That same day after school, my nerves were secretly getting to me as everyone else left for their clubs. I was planning on inviting Hoshimiya out today. Not for a date or anything, I just wanted to ask her if she’d like to head home together. However, I always did like to call myself the ultimate introvert, and that wasn’t helping me right now. Talking to a girl felt like it would completely destroy the equilibrium between heaven and earth. I bet it was

nothing much for extroverts, though!

Why today? Well, there were many reasons. First off, one week had passed since school started, and we'd all gotten closer. At first, it took all of my energy just talking to everyone in a group setting, but now I could hold my own in smaller groups of two or three. Not just when talking to Hoshimiya, but with everyone else as well.

The second reason was that tomorrow we'd all be hanging out together, so we actually had something to talk about. Okay, fine, that one was just a coincidence, but it would make it easier to start a conversation.

The third reason involved timing. Hoshimiya was in the literature club, which met on Tuesdays and Thursdays. So those were bad days to ask her to walk home with me. She would probably get creeped out if I told her I'd wait until she finished. On Mondays and Wednesdays, she went home with Nanase. There were ways I could walk home with them, but the two were close friends who'd gone to the same middle school (besides, they were both girls!), and trying to wiggle myself in between them was just too much for me.

However, on Fridays, Hoshimiya didn't have club activities, and Nanase had lessons near the school, so they didn't go home together. At least, that's what I'd learned from my analysis this past week. Hey, don't call me gross! I was willing to utilize my introverted overanalyzing and plotting tendencies to seize my happy, vibrant school days. I took pride in that.

"Oh? Hoshimiya, you're heading home alone today?" I called out to her from behind in the hallway, pretending I didn't know why she was by herself.

Hoshimiya turned around and gently smiled when she saw me. *She's so cute!* I thought, and I wasn't alone in that. Other students in the hallway were also charmed by her loveliness.

"That's right. Yuino-chan's busy today."

"Oh, then let's walk together. You take the train too, right?" I was actually super nervous while I spoke to her, but I did my best to control my facial expression so none of that would leak out. *Am I asking her casually enough?* I wondered.

“Yeah, okay!” Hoshimiya nodded with a smile, dispelling my worries. “I take the Ryomo Line to Takasaki. What about you, Natsuki-kun?”

“Looks like we’re riding together until Takasaki. I transfer lines there and ride a little farther.”

“Makes sense; you’re from Mizumi! It must be hard to live so far away.”

“It’s been a whole week so I’m used to it now. It’s only about an hour.”

“Oh, that’s actually close to how long my commute takes. I have to walk a while to get home after I get off at Takasaki. I’m thinking I should start riding my bike to the station!”

That’s how our talk progressed peacefully from my harmless conversation starter. As I walked beside Hoshimiya, I realized that we were attracting a lot of attention. *Wow, does Hoshimiya get stared at like this every day? That’s...that’s kind of rough! Feels like a downside of being too cute. Or is she getting stared at even more than usual because she’s walking with a boy?* As the thought occurred to me, I started noticing more envious gazes aimed straight at me.

Bwa ha ha ha! You gloomy losers! You’ll never be able to walk home with Hoshimiya like this! What a sweet, sweet sense of victory and superiority! So this is what it means to live your youth to the fullest, I gloated in my head.

“I feel like people are staring a lot today,” Hoshimiya whispered uncomfortably.

“I feel ya. Walking with you is really different, as expected of the school’s number one beauty.”

“Stop! Don’t take Yuino-chan seriously! And anyway, that’s my line!”

I hesitated and then asked, “What do you mean?” My brow furrowed in confusion. I genuinely didn’t get what she was implying.

“I don’t attract this many stares when I walk alone. I’m not an idol, after all! They’re not just staring at me. They’re staring at you too, Natsuki-kun!”

“They’re...staring at me?” *No way, I thought. That’s impossible! Sure, I worked out a little and styled my hair a bit, but this is me we’re talking about.*

“Aren’t they trash-talking me because I’m with you?” I replied in denial.

“Ah, I see. Natsuki-kun, you’re the oblivious type.”

I looked at her, flabbergasted.

“I see; I see. Hmm. I understand you a bit more.”

Red alert! I’m not following at all. But Hoshimiya looks like she’s having fun, so I guess it’s fine? I get that we’re talking about me here, but beyond that I am totally lost.

“I don’t get what you’re on about, but no one stares at me when I’m alone, you know,” I said. *Okay, well, sometimes I hear girls whispering about me. I wish they would stop gossiping about me behind my back just because I’m a nobody who infiltrated the popular kids!*

“You really are dense,” Hoshimiya replied.

“Me, dense? No way. There aren’t many people who are as perceptive as me,” I countered. *In the past, I thought the girl sitting next to me had a thing for me just because she picked up my eraser for me. Later, I found out that she had a boyfriend who was in college... Okay, maybe this story has nothing to do with me being perceptive or not. I just got the wrong idea.*

“Ha ha, if you say so. Let’s just leave it at that for today.” Hoshimiya smiled at me. The pounding of my heart blew any semblance of thought clear out of my mind, leaving me with nothing to say in return.

“What should we do tomorrow?” she asked, changing the topic. “We didn’t get to plan since everyone went to their clubs.” I’d also been about to divert us to that subject myself.

“Why don’t we just discuss the plans over RINE tonight?” I suggested.

“But we haven’t made a RINE group yet.”

“Oh, right. I thought for sure we’d made one already.” I said that, even though I barely registered RINE’s existence at all. *I’ve always had a reputation—if you could even call it that—for not being invited to the class group chats. Ha ha.*

“Same.” Hoshimiya giggled and took her smartphone out of her pocket. While opening up the app, she said, “Why don’t we make one now? A chat for all six

of us.”

We had all exchanged RINE info on our first day after the entrance ceremony, so all we had to do was create the group and invite the members. At least, I thought that was how it worked. I wouldn’t know; I’d never made one.

“What should we name the group?” she asked.

“Hmm. Just name it something random.”

“I get that it could be literally anything, but that makes it even more stressful! Natsuki-kun, you name it.”

“Okay, how about ‘The Hoshimiya Fan Club’?”

“Hey! It’ll look bad if I make a group with that name.”

“True.” We looked at each other and laughed.

“Okay! Then I’ll name it ‘The Natsuki-kun Fan Club’! How’s that?”

“There’s no way I’d have any fans.”

She paused for a moment before saying, “Hmm, then how about ‘Natsuki-kun’s Fam’?”

“Oy!” I tried to stop her but she’d already made the group. My phone buzzed and I opened it to check. Sure enough, I had an invitation. *I guess I’ll be a sport and join without making a fuss. Natsuki-kun joining “Natsuki-kun’s Fam.” What a riot.*

“Did you get the invite?”

“Yeah, I’m in the group.”

“Oh, I see you! Yuino-chan joined too. The others are still at their clubs so they probably haven’t noticed yet.”

“Yeah, probably.” *Wow, my first group chat. Hah, guess I should celebrate, I thought, as a little jab at myself. A group with five of my seven RINE friends. And the missing two are my mom and my sister. Oh man, I have no friends!*

“Natsuki-kun, look this way!” As directed, I turned towards Hoshimiya and instantly heard her phone click.

“Heh heh heh. Got it!”

“What’re you gonna do with a photo of me?”

“Make it the group icon, of course! It’s called ‘Natsuki-kun’s Fam,’ after all!”

“What? No. Hey, wait!” I complained, but the excited Hoshimiya looked so cute that my words lost all force. Whereas I was always carefully trying to ascertain the distance between us before acting, she seized control of my heart with ease.

Ooh, it’d be fun to get back at her, I thought.

“Hey, Hoshimiya. Look over here!”

“Hm?”

I opened the camera app on my phone and snapped a picture of her the moment she turned towards me. *Nice, I took a good one. I’ll make it my family heirloom— Wait, no! The plan is to use it for our group photo.*

“H-Hey, wait! Natsuki-kun, what’re you doing?!”

“Payback,” I said. I’d also obtained Hoshimiya’s picture through aboveboard means! *I win no matter how she fights back.*

Hoshimiya changed the group icon back to her picture of me. In response, I changed it back to my picture of her. She let out a cute little growl and glared at me. It wasn’t at all scary, so I accidentally laughed.

“I know! Let’s compromise and use a picture of both of us,” Hoshimiya said and then sidled up next to me.

A soft, sweet fragrance wafted up my nose ticklishly. My heartbeat accelerated right past light speed. While I was busy wondering what she was up to, our arms were already touching.

“Ready? Smile! Cheese!”

She took a selfie of the two of us with a quick click of her phone. *She told me to smile, but I feel like I just made a stupid face. Ugh, this is embarrassing!*

“All right, with this, I don’t want to hear any more complaining!” Hoshimiya said as she changed the icon.

I checked RINE again, and sure enough, our picture was the group's icon. Clearly used to taking pictures, Hoshimiya had a genuine smile. I, on the other hand, was red-faced and grinning stiffly.

While I was still reeling from how dorky I looked, Hoshimiya stopped walking. She was staring at the new group icon.

"H-Hey, uh, Hoshimiya," I began.

"Wh-What is it?!"

I hesitated while trying to find the right words. Finally I said, "Um, don't you think this pic is super embarrassing?" Perhaps I was being overly self-conscious, but it looked like we were flaunting how close we were to the others. "Say... If we leave it, it'll be the first thing everyone else sees when they open the invitation. You know what I mean?"

She carefully considered what I'd said. "Y-You're right. Oh gosh, this really is super embarrassing. Let's drop it!" Finally feeling flustered, she turned beet red.

I was starting to get a better grasp of Hoshimiya's personality. Surprisingly, she was the type of person who'd go with the flow, act spontaneously, and then regret it afterwards.

After we both composed ourselves, we took a conservative picture of the cherry blossom trees lining the road and set that as the group's icon. *Thankfully, no one besides Nanase has joined the group chat. We can just pretend like nothing happened.* Of course, right when I thought that, I heard my phone go off.

Nanase Yuino: Can you please refrain from flirting over RINE?

Nanase had witnessed everything from start to finish and sent a message to everyone in the group chat. It made me a tiny bit happy that she thought Hoshimiya and I were flirting, but Hoshimiya was overcome with pure embarrassment.

Hoshimiya Hikari: We're not flirting!

Nanase Yuino: Uh, anyone watching would think that you two are flirting...

Natsuki: This isn't my fault

Hoshimiya Hikari: Are you saying it's mine?!

Natsuki: Well, duh

Nanase Yuino: Whatever. You two are right next to each other so argue in person, not over RINE.

Natsuki: Must you always hit the nail on the head with such accuracy

Hoshimiya Hikari: Anyway, we weren't flirting!

Nanase Yuino: Yeah, yeah

You didn't have to deny it that hard; it kinda stings! I kept that thought to myself, though.

"Oh gosh. Yuino-chan, you..." Hoshimiya trailed off.

I glanced at Hoshimiya. Her fair skin was flushed red and she was fanning her face with her hands. I then admired the photo of the two of us that I had secretly saved. *I'm making this one my family heirloom.*

"It's Nanase saying that; I'm sure she's just kidding," I reassured her.

We continued to chat about silly things and reached the station in a heartbeat. I call them silly, but I really wanted to experience that type of normal idle chatter. A world where I could walk together with everyone—especially with Hoshimiya—was the bright and colorful existence that I desired. It was different from the gray daily life that used to be my reality. I was finally enjoying life the way I had always envisioned.

"We made the group chat, but maybe we should start planning for tomorrow?" Hoshimiya asked.

"Reita has practice in the morning so why don't we meet up around one or two?" I suggested.

"Okay. Then how about we all meet up in front of the station? You know, since three of us take the train."

"Good idea. Now all that's left is to figure out what to do."

"Yep. I'm the one who suggested the outing, so I'd better think of some

options.”

“Hmm. Why don’t we go to a mall or something?”

“That could be good. I wanted to buy some new clothes too,” Hoshimiya said, but the idea didn’t seem to click with her.

I’d read articles like “Hot High School Hangout Spots” online so I had an idea of what we could do near the station. The caveat was that our options were restricted here in Gunma, a prefecture not exactly known for its bustling city life.

“There’s a OneRound kinda near the station. They’ve got a Spor-Cha, karaoke, and an arcade. We could even meet up at someone’s house if anyone lives nearby,” I suggested.

“Oh, a Spor-Cha! That’s a good idea. I was just thinking something physically active would be nice,” Hoshimiya replied.

OneRound was an amusement center that had a variety of attractions, with Spor-Cha being one of them. Spor-Chas were indoor sports complexes that offered facilities and equipment for various recreational activities like basketball, ping-pong, darts, batting practice, badminton, tennis, and more. You could play anything on offer as many times as you wanted as long as it was within the time limit that you’d paid for. Not that I’d ever gone to one before; I’d just read about it on the internet.

“You sound like an old lady who lacks physical exercise.”

“Don’t call me an old lady! Uta-chan and Tatsuya-kun will definitely like it, anyway. The two of them and Reita-kun are always exercising in their club activities. Surely that’s because they love moving around.”

We got through the ticket gate and boarded the train. It was quite crowded, perhaps because of the time of day, even though Gunma residents were more likely than Tokyoites to drive themselves places.

“Will Reita even have energy to play in a Spor-Cha after practice?” I asked.

“Oh, right. Well, we can ask everyone over RINE. It was just a suggestion.”

The train shook with a clickety-clack and off we went. I spotted a number of

students wearing the same uniforms as us.

Come to think of it... Something occurred to me.

“Hoshimiya. Are you good at sports?”

“Nope, not one bit. Don’t expect much from me, okay?”

Yep, thought so. I remembered that fact from my first time in high school. Hence why I was surprised she was so excited to go to a Spor-Cha.

“Aren’t there things you like to do even if you’re bad at them? That’s why I want to go there.” Hoshimiya’s innocent comment stabbed me right in the heart.

I took a moment to recover and then said, “Yeah, you’re right.”

Those words resonated deeply with how I’d been feeling lately. *Things you like even if you’re bad at them.* No matter how much I changed my appearance or acted like a cheerful guy, I was an introvert through and through. The peppy, happy act was hard to keep up and honestly tiring. However, my phony persona was improving my relationships with those around me, and I did enjoy that. My world had been dark and gloomy when I was alone, but now I was surrounded with friends and everything seemed so colorful, so wonderful. Like a rainbow.

That’s why I liked it. I was doing all of this because I truly enjoyed it. Even though I wasn’t cut out for it. Even if I didn’t deserve to be here.

“Thanks, Hoshimiya,” I said. It felt as if she’d affirmed my wayward desire.

“Hm? For what?”

“Nah, it’s nothing. Look, we’re almost at Takasaki.” Just as I said that, the train came to a slow, gentle stop and the doors opened.

“Ah, we’re here. All righty, see you tomorrow, Natsuki-kun!” Hoshimiya said, waving goodbye.

“Yeah, see you tomorrow.” I watched her leave, savoring the simple happiness of my second chance.

“Hmm.” Back at home, I was absorbed in contemplation. *I’m worried. I’m in*

some real trouble. What do I wear tomorrow? I could avoid the issue at school since we had uniforms, but tomorrow was the weekend. I had to show up in my own clothes. However, I only had lame shirts and worn-out pants that I'd owned since middle school. I absolutely did *not* want to show up in those!

"I guess I'll need to go clothes shopping," I mumbled.

Not to brag or anything, but I'm a real fashion master. Uh, I mean fashion disaster. Well, I had worn my own clothes for all four years of college, so at least I'd figured out what clothes were safe by then. Okay, fine—all I did was copy whatever the fashion YouTubers wore.

The real problem is, this is seven years in the past. Even if I think it's passable, it's possible the clothes might be considered tacky by today's standards. Ugh, what do I do?

While I racked my brain for ideas, my phone rang. It was a number I didn't recognize, but I picked up anyway.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Natsuki? It's me," a familiar voice said over the phone.

"Miori? What is it? Also, how did you get my number?"

"I asked Namika-chan for it."

"Oh, right. You're friends with my sister." I had completely forgotten that. It was the same as last time around; Namika and Miori had often chatted back then. "Anyway, why did you ask her for my number?"

"I wanted to do some info gathering. You know, about *my* Reita-kun."

"When did he become a thing for you to own?" I asked rhetorically.

"Don't sweat the details. Can you come out now?"

"Can't we just talk over the phone?"

"I mean, I guess we could, but we live close to each other so isn't it faster to talk face-to-face?"

"I guess," I agreed and left the house. I was only wearing a tracksuit, but I figured it would be fine since it was just Miori. Besides, a tracksuit was about

my only wearable outfit right now. “Does the park work?”

“Yeah. Actually, I’m already here.”

I stayed on the phone with her and soon arrived at the park. Miori was sitting on a swing, with the setting sun shining on her. The foliage of the cherry blossom trees had already turned green.

“Ew, you look lame,” Miori said as soon as she saw me.

“That’s the first thing you say? There’s nothing lame or shitty about tracksuits!” I responded, a little hurt. *My mentality is as fragile as glass right now!*

“Okay, fine, but you showed up in a tracksuit to meet a girl. Really?”

“I don’t really own decent clothes. If anything, this is the best I’ve got.”

“Are you for real?” Miori visibly recoiled and looked almost disgusted. I had to admit, though, she looked pretty good in her casual clothes. She was wearing a girlish white lace blouse and slim-fit jeans.

Man, when I take another look, she does look cute! I’m used to seeing her in uniform, but the gap between this outfit and the stuff she wore back in the day makes her look even cuter. Let’s just leave it at that.

In elementary school, Miori could’ve easily been mistaken for a boy due to her short hair and tomboyish clothes—she was what you might’ve called a “youngster” back then, always wearing shorts that were easy to move around in and stuff.

Maybe I should try asking her for fashion help. I don’t feel like handing out info for free anyway.

“I’ll agree to tell you about Reita, but I have some conditions.”

“Hm? Sure, what is it? Trouble already?” Miori tilted her head questioningly.

Did you really need to tack on “already”? I thought, then said, “Well, you see, I’m hanging out with that crew tomorrow, but...”

“Oh, got it. You’ve got nothing to wear. Am I right?” My predicament seemed like a joke to her.

I nodded. “I don’t know what would happen if I followed my own fashion sense. So, you know, please.”

“You’re going out tomorrow? Then we have to figure it out today. We’re short on time so I think the best we can do is head over to the nearby Unislo and pick something out. It’ll turn out to be safe and boring if you’re fine with that.”

“Safe and boring are fine. Honestly, that’s preferred.”

“Hmm, okay, then let’s get going. I don’t want to get home too late.”

Miori and I left the park together. The closest Unislo was by the station, about a ten-minute walk. I thought she would immediately start asking me questions about Reita, but she started texting someone over RINE. And so, we walked together in silence.

Miori treated me the same way she always had, but I just couldn’t discern how close we actually were. “Brat Commander” Miori, who used to drag other kids around, had now become a proper girl. I just couldn’t get used to it.

That was to say nothing of the huge void caused by the three years of middle school where we’d never even talked. In the past, I hadn’t been bothered by silence between the two of us, but now it felt awkward.

“We can’t instantly go back to how things used to be,” Miori murmured. It was as if she had seen right through me.

My astonishment must’ve clearly shown on my face.

“Bull’s-eye? You’ve always been easy to read,” Miori said, staring straight at me.

“It’s because I loosen up when I’m with you,” I grumbled. When I was with Miori, I often retreated into the recesses of my thoughts without paying attention. I was more careful not to make a mistake by getting lost in thought when I was with Tatsuya and co. Being silent wasn’t a good vibe, after all. However, Miori had known me for a long time now so I felt little need to put up any pretenses around her.

“So? How’s your high school debut going?” she asked.

“Don’t just summarize my tear-inducing efforts as a high school debut,” I

replied. *Okay, fine, there isn't a better term for it.*

"I never imagined that you, Natsuki, of all people would end up in such a dazzling group."

"I know I don't belong," I said with a pout.

Miori laughed and shook her head. "That's not true. Right now, you're quite the dazzler, yourself."

"Uh... Huh..." I struggled to find the right words. *Stop praising me out of nowhere! It always makes me feel kinda shook.*

"Ugh. That reaction is gross. You're definitely not going to dazzle anyone right now."

"Shut up! I'm not used to being complimented." I looked away.

Miori giggled while covering her mouth. Even her gestures had become more feminine. It seemed like three years was plenty of time for a person to change.

"Well, it's fun to see you out there shining under the spotlight."

"This is why I didn't want to go to the same high school as someone from my middle school," I grumbled again.

"You sure? Doesn't it suck if there's no one around who knows what you're really like?" Miori asked quietly as she looked up at the setting sun.

I remained silent. I'd never thought about that before. But I knew there was some truth in her words.

"I'm the only one around who you can rely on without putting up a front, right?"

I was annoyed by how confident she sounded, but I had no rebuttal. After all, I was asking her for fashion advice right now. *It's true. I guess Miori really is the only one I can ask for help.*

"I think I'm the perfect conspirator from your point of view too." Miori twirled around and stood in front of me.

"Conspirator?"

"I told you before. I want to get to know Reita-kun and get closer to him. So

help me out. It'll be easier for me if you lend me a hand since you're in the same friend group." Miori stuck her hand out in front of me. If I took her hand, our partnership would be formally established.

"Are you saying that, in exchange, you'll help me out if I need it?"

"Of course. I'll help your little high school debut plan succeed and turn you into the center of attention!"

"I don't particularly want to become the center of attention."

I just wanted to live a satisfying youth. To be more specific, I wanted to overwrite my drab old high school memories with ones full of rainbows. That's why I was starting over like this. I wanted to be a cheerful person so I could be friends with Tatsuya, date Hoshimiya, and have fun every day with the friends I made, just like I was doing now.

I'd tried to explain the gist of that to Miori without mentioning my chance at a redo. "Get it? My high school debut is just a means to an end; it's not the real goal."

"I see; I see." She thought for a moment and then said, "I get it! You want a girlfriend, right?"

"Were you listening to me at all?"

"Don't most people go through a high school debut to get a date? Yeah, I get you. I also want to date a hottie..." She trailed off and then repeated herself. "I really want a hot boyfriend. And I mean *really*."

"I don't need to hear any graphic descriptions of your thirsting," I said. *You're ruining my sacred image of high school girls.*

"Anyway, if you help me out, I'll help you get a girlfriend too. You like one of those three girls, yeah? They're all cute."

I had trouble coming up with a reply since she was right about that. "B-Back to the topic at hand! Didn't you have questions about Reita?"

Displeased by my obvious subject change, Miori muttered, "Running away, huh?" She switched gears, though, and said, "Yeah. I'm guessing you're accepting my proposal since you're asking that. Okay?"

I gave it one last thought and then agreed. “Well, it’s not a bad deal for me. So all right.” At the same time, I was thinking, *To be honest, I’m grateful that I can ask Miori for help. It would go to her head if I told her, though, so I’m definitely keeping that to myself!*

“Perfect! Then first, tell me what Reita-kun likes and...” Miori’s excitement shot through the roof.

We became so engrossed in our discussion that we barely registered when we’d arrived at Unislo. She thoroughly picked my brain about every little thing I knew about Reita.

“Well, I had a feeling, but is this seriously all you know?” Miori let out a loud sigh.

“Well, yeah! It’s barely been a week since school started. Of course I only know surface-level stuff.”

“Hm. Okay, I guess I’ll have to hope for the best in the future.”

“Do you like Reita that much?”

“Hm? I’m interested, but I wouldn’t say I *like* like him. I’m always keeping an eye out for resident hotties. Hot guys are the best! You can never get tired of their faces. Know what I mean?” Miori said with a creepy smile. The laugh that came after was a bit scary too.

High school girls these days are like wolves. It’s terrifying!

After much ado, Miori and I finally ended up at Unislo to pick out innocuous clothes for me. Why Unislo? Well, not only did I need clothes on the double, I also didn’t have money for expensive stuff. *Honestly, all clothes are expensive for a high schooler!*

“Maybe I should get a job,” I muttered while staring at a shirt with a few-thousand-yen price tag.

“Are you that broke?”

“I have money. All of it will evaporate into thin air after buying clothes, though.”

“True that!”

I received an allowance every month but it definitely wasn't enough. *I'm not in a club, meaning I have time to spare when everyone else is at their clubs. A job makes sense.*

“All right, what to do with you?” Miori scrutinized my appearance carefully while tapping her chin. “Hmm, your figure is good. I think keeping it simple actually suits you well. You were always on the tall side, but I never expected you'd lose weight and build up muscle.” She touched my sides without warning, causing me to jump up in surprise.

“Hey! What're you—”

“What? Come on, you're a guy and you don't like being touched?” Miori giggled. It didn't matter how long I'd known a girl; there was no way physical contact with one wouldn't shake me to my core. *I've lived the introvert life for longer than my current age!*

“Okay, let's see. Try this one, this one...and this! Come on, try them on!” Miori grabbed a few options and then pushed me towards the fitting room. She looked like she was having fun. *Miori is a girl, after all. I guess it makes sense that she likes picking out clothes.*

“It's fun having someone be your dress-up doll!” she said happily.

“Use me as a dress-up doll all you want; just make sure to pick clothes properly!”

“Just leave it to me. I've got a good model so I'm sure it'll be fine no matter what,” Miori said then started humming. I was a bit dubious but I had no other option but to rely on her.

“Thank you for your patronage. Please come again!” the clerk said as we left the store. The sun had set completely by the time we finished.

Both of my hands were weighed down with heavy bags. I had bought clothes not just for tomorrow, but also for future outings. In total I'd spent over ten thousand yen. *My poor wallet! These expenses hurt for a high schooler, but*

they're a necessary cost.

"We bought a lot," I moaned aloud.

"Heh heh. Wasn't it kinda fun?" Miori asked.

It was as she said; I had enjoyed trying on different clothes. I used to think that clothes didn't matter, but seeing my improved appearance when I dressed well felt pretty nice. Losing weight had been worth it.

"So, you're wearing this tomorrow?" she continued.

"That's the plan."

"Good luck. It's just Unislo in the end so it's not particularly fashionable, but I think it looks good. The rest is up to your posture and expression. Don't slouch. Stand up straight!" she directed, slapping me on the back.

I do slouch a lot, maybe because I'm so tall. I'd better be careful.

"If the opportunity arises and we have more time, I'll help you pick out something more stylish. It'll be more expensive, though. We could even go to Shibuya or some other city!"

"I don't have the money for that." I sighed and stared up at the night sky.
"Maybe I really should get a job."

Though it was already mid-spring, the night air was still cool.

"A convenience store, a café, a family restaurant, a karaoke place..." I started listing some options aloud as we walked home. "Maybe even a bookstore."

"How about a clothing store?"

"No way. I've got zero fashion sense, and I get nervous talking to strangers."

"Fashion sense aside, you still get nervous talking to strangers, huh? I guess it's hard to change someone's true nature."

"I wouldn't be struggling this much if it were easy," I replied. I continued to think about options for a part-time job. *I worked at a café and a family restaurant during college. But maybe it'll be more interesting if I try something new instead of staying in my comfort zone... Hmm. What to do? I feel like there's something worth experiencing from a high school part-time job. I'd*

better choose carefully.

These thoughts floated through my head even as Miori and I parted ways.

It was 1 p.m. the next day. I'd been so nervous that I arrived thirty minutes early. There was still time to spare while I waited for everyone else. The others all arrived a reasonable ten or fewer minutes earlier. Last to arrive was Tatsuya, who got there two minutes before the decided meeting time.

"Oh man, I thought I was gonna be late so I rushed over," Tatsuya said as he bought water from a nearby vending machine. He wore a plain gray shirt and ripped slim-fit jeans. He also had a silver necklace on.

His clothes might've looked tasteless on some, but they matched Tatsuya's wild face and hair well. I thought he looked like an unruly college student, though.

"Why are you running late in the afternoon?" Nanase asked, brows furrowed in puzzlement. She was wearing a chiffon blouse tucked into wide-leg pants, and she had a small white beret on her head. I was surprised by how cute her clothes were.

Is this what they call spring fashion?

"Tatsu's always been late to things even when he doesn't oversleep!" Uta laughed. She wore a dark checkered shirt dress that exposed her shoulders. It looked like something that'd give off a vintage feel, but the dark color which felt like the opposite of her personality and the bare shoulders gave off mature, even somewhat amorous vibes. The short, usually childish Uta now looked strangely adultlike. But it suited her well.

"I get that, though," Hoshimiya chimed in with an understanding smile. "Sometimes I get too relaxed when I'm waiting and lose track of time." She wore a white blouse and slim-fit pants in a simple and androgynous style. It created the illusion that she had long legs even though she was average height

for a girl.

“You say that, but I bet you’re the type of person who’s never late, Hoshimiya-san,” Reita said. He had on black skinny jeans and a plain, light-beige button-down over a darker beige T-shirt with a white tall T-shirt layered underneath. *I feel like he looks more cool than calm and gentle right now.*

“I showed up early and almost got bored of waiting.” I decided this was a good point to join the conversation after examining everyone’s outfits. They were all as stylish as I’d expected—looking several times more charming than usual, so much so that I’d become entranced if I wasn’t careful.

Especially the girls! The gap between their looks now and how they normally look at school is just too much.

I didn’t know if the three girls were aware of my thoughts, but they were currently chatting to each other about their outfits. Contrary to what you might have expected, apparently Hoshimiya liked cool fashion, Uta liked mature looks, and Nanase liked cute clothes. They sorta looked more sparkly than usual, maybe because they were wearing makeup this weekend.

“They do know that we’re going to a Spor-Cha, right?” Reita asked with a shrug. We started talking amongst ourselves since the girls were off in their own world.

“I know, right! Those clothes don’t look easy to move around in. They look good though,” Tatsuya said approvingly.

“Well, we’re not doing intense exercise so isn’t it fine?” I pointed out to the two boys who were smiling wryly. I said that, but I’d never been to a Spor-Cha before, so I only knew what I’d read on the web. I was just faking it.

“That’s true. C’mon, let’s get going,” Tatsuya said and started walking off. Everyone followed while making idle conversation.

This is fresh. I’ve never hung out with my friends on the weekend before. I kinda feel warm and fuzzy inside.

“Um, Natsuki-kun, where did you buy your clothes?” Hoshimiya popped up

next to me and peered up at my face.

“Hm? I bought this from Unislo.” I looked down at my clothes, worried. “Do I look bad?”

She giggled and then reassured me, “Jeez, Natsuki-kun, you’re too negative. I wanted to compliment you.”

I felt relieved as soon as those words left her mouth. *Miori really does have good taste.* I was wearing an oversized shirt and black wide-leg slacks. My outfit was loose and easy to put on, plus it highlighted my figure. *I really owe Miori one for picking this out for me!*

Complimenting Hoshimiya’s clothes seemed like the logical flow of conversation since she’d complimented mine, so I did. “Oh, well, Hoshimiya...your clothes look nice too. You look cool.” I ended up tripping over the words a bit, but at least my voice didn’t shake.

“Cool? Not cute?” Hoshimiya asked. She sounded a bit peeved.

She’d rather be cute? But that was my honest evaluation! I panicked a bit internally.

“Ah ha ha, just kidding! I like androgynous fashion myself. I’ll buy men’s clothing too if it catches my fancy. I’m happy you think I look cool!” Hoshimiya smiled shyly. Her abashed expression was the perfect embodiment of cuteness itself.

Right as my conversation with Hoshimiya was winding down, Tatsuya said, “Hey, it should be around here.”

“Where is it? I’ve never been here before,” Nanase said, looking around.

Same here. First time for me too! I felt a sort of fellowship with her.

Uta pointed to a tall building near us. “It’s right over there! You can see it already. The three of us went a bunch in middle school.”

“Right? It’s close to Ojima Middle. I remember that one time we fought over whether we should do karaoke, play at the Spor-Cha, or go bowling, for some reason. Reita was strangely set on bowling that day,” Tatsuya recalled.

“I was just in the mood for bowling,” Reita explained.

“Rei gets really stubborn at random times. Don’t ever disobey him when he’s like that!” Uta told us.

Hoshimiya naturally spoke up during their reminiscing without fear. “Wow. Will we ever get to see you like that?”

“Hoshimiya-san, I think you’d concede before we could even argue. These two are the weird ones,” Reita said.

“Eh? Okay then, I’ll be extra stubborn,” she said. The two of them shared a laugh, making them seem extra close.

I don’t care when Uta or Nanase talk to guys, but it bothers me when Hoshimiya does! That’s definitely jealousy. I felt disgruntled by how small-minded I was being.

“Hey, let’s go in already,” Tatsuya called back to the rest of us. We’d been walking slowly, immersed in conversation.

The way he moved ahead at his own pace without a care for others really screamed pushy jock. *Well, I’m confident that I can move quickly while alone too. I’ve always been alone, after all. The only difference between me and Tatsuya is whether people will follow behind us or not. Ha ha ha... Okay, stop there. I’m getting ahead of myself.*

“Oh, we’re here already?” I said.

“Natsuki, is this your first time at OneRound?” Reita asked.

For a moment I hesitated on how to answer but I nodded honestly. “Yeah. There were talks about going eventually, but it’s expensive for a middle schooler.” *I feel like it’s best not to pretend during times like this. Besides, there’s no way it’s weird for a high school first-year to have never been to OneRound before.* I decided not to lie since the risk of getting caught was too high.

“That’s true. We only went three or four times,” Reita said, laughing casually.

It was only a three-minute walk from the station to OneRound. However, walking with this lineup of people really drew the gazes of random pedestrians. Made sense; everyone was so attractive. I’m sure there were people who

thought, “Oh, look, there’s a normal-looking guy mixed in.” *Hey, I worked hard, all right?!*

While I, the lone introvert, was having a moment, the extroverts went inside. *I’m amazed at how they don’t hesitate at all when entering huge buildings like this. They really have no fear! Tatsuya’s face even looks like he’s thinking, “I’m the main character here,” or something.*

“Hey, how long should we stay? Two hours?” Tatsuya asked.

“What? That’s too short. Six hours should be enough!” Uta proposed.

“U-Um, I think that’s a bit much. I don’t think I can move around for that long,” Hoshimiya said.

“We wouldn’t be done until seven. That’s cutting it too close to Hikari’s curfew,” Nanase vetoed.

“It’d be nice to eat dinner together since we’re all out. How about three hours?” Reita suggested, taking everyone’s opinions into account. No one objected so he went to deal with the clerk.

Give me those skills! I silently begged. *Reita is so perfect. So superhuman! He doesn’t have a single flaw.*

“Okay, let’s go in,” Reita said after he finished talking with the clerk. He and Tatsuya led the way while the rest of us followed behind.

“Whoo! It’s been so long!” Uta said. “What should we do first? What do you wanna do, huh?” She jumped up and down in excitement. I was also secretly pumped since it was my first time here.

The inside was huge. There were facilities for all kinds of sports, and many people were enjoying themselves. *Wow, so this is what it’s like. I’ve always wanted to come here, but showing up alone would be pointless.*

“Why don’t we start with something that’s currently available? How about ping-pong?” Reita pointed to the area where ping-pong tables were lined up. There were two tables not in use.

“Ping-pong! Sounds good! Let’s play! Let’s do it!” Uta exclaimed.

“Oh! I’m so-so at ping-pong. Compared to how terrible I am at other sports,

anyway.” Hoshimiya let out a smug laugh and crossed her arms.

Her display made Tatsuya laugh loudly. “Really? Okay then, Hoshimiya, I’ll give you a taste of my smash!”

Her smug face faltered. “Uh, I’d rather not play against Tatsuya-kun. I’m too scared.” Hoshimiya made a show of backing away from the intimidating Tatsuya and hid behind Uta.

“If you want to lay your hands on Hikarin then you’ll have to defeat me first!” Uta proclaimed.

“Why am I being treated like an evil villain?” Tatsuya asked glumly. However, he went along with Uta’s sprightliness and played against her.

This is my chance, I thought and invited Hoshimiya to play. “Hey, Hoshimiya, let’s take it easy at the table next to them.”

“Okay! Be gentle, please.” She smiled. Just being able to see her smile like that made today worth it!

Reita and Nanase sat down in some chairs for those who were waiting their turn. They would swap with whichever pair finished first, or take a third table if one opened up.

Hoshimiya raised her racket. Nanase cheered from her chair, “Hikari, good luck!”

“Then I’ll root for Natsuki. Why don’t we play a tournament since we’re doing this?” Reita suggested.

“Good idea! That sounds fun!” Uta shouted from the other table as she rallied with Tatsuya. *That is one high-level match*, I observed. *They’re no amateurs with the way they swing their rackets and how long their rallies are. Are all peppy people good at sports? They’re good at everything. I’m jealous; I just slink around in the back during PE! Not like anyone ever passes to me, anyway.*

Wait a second. That’s not really an issue of athletics, I retorted to myself, like a one-man comedy show. *That aside, I’m not bad at sports. Sure, I’m not good at them either, but my ping-pong skills are definitely on the better side.*

“Whoa, you two are incredible,” Hoshimiya said. I let out a dry laugh when I

noticed her dumbfounded face.

“Let’s keep it chill even though it’s technically a match,” I said.

“Yeah!”

I softly hit the ping-pong ball to her. The ball landed in bounds with room to spare. I thought Hoshimiya would easily return it, but...

“Huh?!” she exclaimed.

Hoshimiya swung her racket at empty air.

Uh, is it just me, or was there a lot of space between the racket and the ball just now?

“S-Sorry! I’m a bit rusty.” Hoshimiya chased after the ball, beet red.

W-Well, I’m sure it’s been a while since she last played. Sometimes those instincts don’t come back from the get-go.

After missing three more times, Hoshimiya was finally able to return the ball. But only if I gently hit it right in the middle of her side, where it was easy to return. If the ball landed even slightly to the sides, she would miss, or she’d manage to graze the ball with the racket and send it flying in the wrong direction. “I see. Hm. I see?” she would say.

“A-Ah ha ha... I’m really off my game today. Just a bit?” Hoshimiya laughed as if to cover something up while she fanned her scarlet cheeks with the racket.

Nanase, who was giggling in her chair, called out to me, “Don’t you think it’s time you gave her a taste of reality?”

“Hoshimiya,” I began, “I can’t believe you said you were so-so at ping-pong compared to other sports.”

“D-Don’t say that! I really am better at ping-pong than other sports! I know it’s not impressive!” Hoshimiya retorted, still embarrassed. It was cute seeing her like that, but I was so surprised by how bad she was. *If this is so-so, what’s she like at other sports?*

“As you can see, Hikari’s only flaw is how catastrophically bad at physical activities she is,” Nanase teased.

“Huh? But wasn’t Hoshimiya-san the one who suggested we go to a Spor-Cha?” Reita asked with a grin. He playfully tilted his head a little to the side.

“I suck at them, but I like sports! Is there a problem?!” Hoshimiya indignantly asked. Her face was still flushed, and she waved her arms like a child throwing a tantrum. Seeing her like this was a new experience but she was still adorable. *Well, Hoshimiya is cute no matter what she does. But at this rate, I’m going to think, “Hoshimiya is cute!” all day long.*

I continued my match—err—I continued coddling Hoshimiya at ping-pong. She really did look like she was having a blast, though. *I guess it’s true that she likes it even though she’s bad.*

In the end, no matter how easy I went on Hoshimiya, I still won the match. The game at the table next to us was very intense, with Tatsuya finally coming out on top. Uta stamped her feet in frustration at the loss. Tatsuya fanned the flames by flaunting his victory in her face.



Reita and Nanase had a close match since they both had good reflexes. In the end, the result was determined by a difference in experience. Reita had come here multiple times with Tatsuya and Uta, whereas Nanase had only really played in gym class.

Of course, it was the same for me, so I lost to Reita in the second round. My footwork wasn't terrible thanks to my daily exercise, but the skill gap was my downfall.

"All right, Reita! Finally, after all these years, it's time to settle our score!" Tatsuya hammed it up.

"Tatsuya, have you ever even beaten me?" Reita replied coolly.

"Shut up! What's important is that I'm going to win right now!" Tatsuya yelled, resolved this time.

The match kicked off after their little banter.

"For real?! That's out?!"

Reita came out victorious over Tatsuya, who'd been seeded first in the bracket. It was a nail-biting match.

"Man! That was awesome," I said.

"I'm actually better than them, though. It's true!" Uta insisted. She was still salty over her loss.

"Yes, yes. Uta, you can play on the same level as those two, right? Yep, yep," I said to soothe her anger.

"Obviously!"

I reflected on their fierce match while I continued to placate Uta. *Tatsuya's smash was crazy strong but Reita still returned it. I think Tatsuya would've won if he could aim his smashes more accurately, but at that point he might as well join the ping-pong club.*

"I'm tired," Tatsuya panted as he sprawled out on the ground. "Let's go! Next!"

"Dude, aren't you going to take a break?" I retorted.

“You fool! We’re on a timer; you think we can afford to rest?!” Tatsuya roared.

“L-Looks like you’re still overflowing with energy.”

Ah, crap, he yelled so loud that I replied like a frightened animal! I know Tatsuya isn’t mad or anything, but I can’t help but reel back in fear when someone gets loud or uses aggressive language. I’m an introvert! Okay, that’s true and all, but in the end, I guess I’m still letting my past memories weigh me down. I wish I’d get over them already!

“I’ll blow away my frustrations with a bat! To the batting cages!” Tatsuya yelled and ran off on his own.

“I’m good on ping-pong for now, so shall we follow Tatsuya? I’m fine leaving him alone too, though,” Reita said.

“That’s terrible! Is that how you treat your friends?” I asked.

“You know, when you’re really close friends, you can leave each other alone.”

“I can’t tell if that statement’s deep or superficial.”

“I agree,” said Nanase. “It means they’re close enough to be real with each other.”

Reita’s words stuck in my mind. *Close enough to be real, huh? I don’t have anyone like that outside of my family. Even now, the others still watch their tongues around me. Reita only makes cutting remarks about Tatsuya and Uta too. Of course he would. It’s only been a week since school started. I hope we become close enough for that one day, though.*

I wanted to get closer to them—all five of them. And I wanted to get even closer to Hoshimiya. I was sure the rainbow-colored youth I’d dreamed of was waiting for me in the future.

After ping-pong, we moved on to other activities such as batting practice, badminton, tennis, futsal, darts, and billiards, before taking a break at the rest area. The sporty trio was still full of vigor, but Hoshimiya and Nanase were already spent. I was still good to go thanks to my daily exercise. The training I’d

done over spring break had been way more strenuous. *To be fair, if you check the clock, it's been two whole hours and we've been moving around a lot. Good job, everyone!*

"Someone...get me a sports drink..." Hoshimiya wheezed, slumped over a table.

I got up in answer to her pleas. "Anyone else? I'll bring back as much as I can carry."

"Oh, I'll go with you too. All right, everyone, pay up." Reita stood as well and collected the funds. Then the two of us headed off to the vending machines to procure sports drinks, tea, and water for the others. *I feel like Reita and I have been partnering up for stuff like this a lot lately. Well, I guess we are in the same friend group.*

"You know, Natsuki, you're pretty incredible," Reita said, impressed, as we walked.

"Uh, what do you mean?"

"You can keep up with the three of us even though you're not in a sports club."

"Oh, well, you guys aren't in serious mode." *It's all just fun and games in the end, I thought. I doubt this is enough to tire them out.*

Also, Hoshimiya has poor reflexes, so I bet she wasted a lot of energy, and Nanase just doesn't have much stamina in the first place. That's probably why they're exhausted. Okay, let's be real; I could go for another five hours and still have energy to spare. I'm having a blast!

Thanks to my exercise regimen, I was light on my feet and my body moved the way I wanted. It wasn't like my reflexes had improved or anything, but now I could keep up with the sporty trio.

"Well, everyone was going hard during badminton and you still won," Reita said.

"Uta was my partner; it's all thanks to her." We'd changed up the format from a singles bracket to a doubles round-robin for badminton. The pairs were me

and Uta, Nanase and Tatsuya, and Reita and Hoshimiya. Uta and I had won both of our games. “And besides, Hoshimiya was probably holding you back.”

“That’s not true...” Reita said but then added with a dry laugh, “...is what I wish I could say.” Beating around the bush was unusual for him.

“No, really, it’s crazy how long you held on with Hoshimiya as your teammate. I thought we were gonna lose!”

Reita really can do anything. Whereas Tatsuya’s the type to power his way through any obstacle, Reita has a discerning eye. It’s like he can figure out the best method for any situation and gradually adapt.

“I wasn’t sure about Tatsuya’s team, but I thought I’d be able to beat you two. I have a good grasp of Uta’s skill, but it looks like I underestimated you. I didn’t expect you to be so nimble, what with your height.” Reita poked my stomach as he said that.

Hearing praise from someone I looked up to as a sports genius really made me feel like my hard work had been worth it. I must’ve looked unsightly back when my stomach was all flabby.

Hoshimiya’s a girl so her lack of athleticism makes her all the more cute, but if a guy who’s trying to act cool like me—though I’m clearly too unsociable and reserved—turns out to be terrible at sports, it just looks pathetic. I’d be teased about it forever! If that happened, my standing in the group would weaken. And even worse, if I handled the situation poorly, I very well might get kicked out.

“Hey, is something wrong? Earth to Natsuki,” Reita called out.

“Oh, sorry, it’s nothing,” I replied. *I know they aren’t the types to boot someone out of friendship status, but I was despised so much that I got kicked out last time. I know it was my fault and I deserved it, but it’s traumatizing for me.*

“Hey, Natsuki,” Reita started in an awfully serious tone as we were buying everyone’s drinks from the vending machine. When I glanced over at him, his gaze was fixed straight at me.

“Hm? What’s up?” I asked, deliberately keeping my tone lighthearted. I had a feeling the topic wasn’t going to be fun, but I had no idea *what* he wanted to

discuss. *I don't think I've misplayed today*, I thought. Every move I'd made so far had been carefully calculated.

That's why Reita's question came out of left field.

"Do you dislike Tatsuya?"

I was speechless, and my silence was all the confirmation Reita needed.

"Thought so," he said with a faint smile. It sounded like he already knew and was just confirming his suspicions.

"Why do you think that?" I finally asked in return.

"It's nothing much. I just had a feeling you were avoiding him. The two of us have been teaming up quite often, but you don't go anywhere alone with him, right?"

"Now that you mention it, yeah, that's true. I'm surprised you noticed."

Reita laughed. "I've made it a habit to observe my surroundings... Though, sometimes I see *too* much. At first, I figured you just hadn't gotten used to each other so I let it be, but today I felt like it went deeper than that."

"Deeper than that? What do you think it is, then?"

"It looked like you were scared of Tatsuya. I hope it's just my imagination, though." He hit the nail on the head.

I wasn't sure how to respond. *He was convinced enough that he asked me directly*, I thought, *so I doubt I can just play it off*. Shiratori Reita really pays close attention to others—and he has the confidence to ask questions head-on.

"You're right; it's just as you say," I admitted honestly. I had no other choice. "But it's not what you're thinking. It's a personal problem, not Tatsuya's fault. He hasn't done anything wrong at all. So please don't say anything to him. It'll fix itself in time...I think."

It was the truth. My aversion was because of the deep emotional trauma remaining in my heart. *I can't tell you this is my second chance at high school, so please just let me off with this and don't press any further*.

"Okay. I'll go with that, then." Reita nodded as he opened his sports drink.

“You will?”

“I’ve got no right to step in. It’s a problem between the two of you. No, it’s not even a problem since that blockhead Tatsuya hasn’t noticed. I was just curious.” Reita took a gulp of his drink and said plainly, “It’s just...we’re friends, right?” He smiled and poked me in the chest with the bottle.

The way Reita could casually touch me and say something so embarrassing truly made him the pinnacle of all extroverts and popular kids in the world. And he looked cool doing it! Surely it was because he did it with confidence.

“I wanted to know what’s got you so worried. But if you say you’ll handle it, then I won’t pry and I’ll believe in you.” His words hit me hard. He’d guessed that I couldn’t tell him what the core problem was.

I get why Reita is popular with girls. This guy’s too radiant for me right now!

After we finished buying all the drinks, we returned to the others, who gave us a warm welcome back. *Reita is talking to everyone normally as if nothing happened. I’d better live up to his trust and work hard. I’ll overcome my trauma and become good friends with Tatsuya!*

“Whew, I’m alive again!” Uta exclaimed after a swig.

“It’s been a while since I’ve done any physical activity. It’s exhausting,” Nanase groaned.

“Ah ha ha! Yui-Yui, I bet you’re gonna moan about muscle pain tomorrow!” Uta teased. *When in the world did Uta give Nanase a weird nickname too?* I wondered.

“Can you just call me Yui?” Nanase barely managed to voice her objection through her exhaustion. *At school she looks so composed and keeps her posture perfectly straight, so this is a refreshing sight.*

“Wow, this is a rare sight to see from you, Nanase,” I said.

Hoshimiya grinned widely and added, “Yuino-chan just acts cool at school. This is proof that she’s relaxed around us!”

“Oh? That makes me feel nice if it’s true,” I said, trying to use a light, teasing

tone.

Nanase looked away from us shyly. “I’m not trying to act cool or anything in the first place...”

Argh, too cute! Oops, my single-hearted dedication to Hoshimiya wavered for a moment there.

Unlike the others who were cheerful popular kids, Nanase had a different vibe to her. She was like a cool beauty who wasn’t the type to get hyped up about things. So there was a destructive force behind the fact that she secretly thought of us as good friends.

“All right, we should get moving soon.” Tatsuya eagerly stood up once everyone had finished rehydrating.

“Whaaat? Let’s rest for a bit longer,” Hoshimiya complained.

“Honestly, I’d be okay if we left...” Nanase agreed.

Reita glanced at the clock and said, “We’ll run out of time if we rest any longer. Why don’t the two of you relax while we play?”

Tatsuya pointed into the distance, oblivious to their discussion. “It’s now or never! The basketball court is finally open!”

“Oooh! At last!” Uta stood up as well, eyes twinkling with excitement. The two of them ran off together without a care.

We had been tackling different games all day, but we hadn’t yet managed to catch the basketball court while it was available. Whenever we finished one game, another group was always using it. *I guess Tatsuya was keeping an eye on the court during our break.*

“Didn’t they play basketball at their club practice yesterday?” I cocked my head, baffled.

Hoshimiya giggled. “They really love basketball.”

“Practice and playing for fun are different, after all. I feel them,” Reita said and then stood up to join in.

“Okay, then we’ll watch from close by,” Nanase said.

“Sounds good.” I looked over at her. “Man, Nanase, you look like you’re about to keel over!”

“I got a little too worked up,” she panted.

“Did you get too excited because you’re hanging out with friends?” Hoshimiya teased.

“Hikari, be quiet!” Nanase snapped back.

Hoshimiya and Nanase’s cheeky banter made Reita and me grin as we followed after Tatsuya and Uta. The two of them had already started practicing shooting hoops from wherever they pleased.

“Here, Natsuki!” Reita passed me a ball.

I was sent down memory lane as soon as I caught it. I had enjoyed basketball; that was part of the reason why I’d stayed in the club for three whole years. In college, I even diligently practiced shooting hoops alone. *Well, okay, maybe it was because I had a lot of free time!*

I dribbled the ball rhythmically. Today was the first day I’d touched a basketball since the time leap, but I wouldn’t lose my feel for dribbling in just a few months without practice. The ball fit snugly in my hands.

Shooting, however, was a different story. Unlike dribbling, shooting required a delicate touch that was easily lost if you didn’t practice for two or three days. Even though I had seven years’ worth of experience, I’d already lost confidence in my ability to make shots.

I have no confidence. None at all! But I’ve still got the intuition of a basketballer. As soon as I dribbled up to the three-point line and focused on the hoop, I realized, *Oh, I’m feeling on point today!*

“Huh? He’s amazing!” I heard Hoshimiya yell in surprise.

I’d taken a shot right before the three-point line, and it swished in cleanly, without touching the hoop, leaving the net gently swaying. I wasn’t surprised or anything; I could tell I was in good condition. I’d known the ball would go in from the moment it left my fingers.

The basketball bounced right back into my hands. “The ball is light,” I

muttered. “No, is it my body that’s light?”

The ball felt extraordinarily light, perhaps as another benefit of my daily exercise. That must’ve been why I could handle it so easily. Three-pointers were difficult shots to make because of the basketball’s heft. I normally needed to bend my knees and use my whole body’s strength to shoot the ball. However, today I’d made it in with just a light jump and flick of my wrist.

Wow, being physically fit really is awesome! I took another shot. The ball left my fingers once more with a gentle, relaxed motion.

I was certain it would go in.

Right after I thought that, the ball went through the hoop with another clean swish. “Hm.” *I would’ve worked out in college if I’d known it was going to make this big a difference! I get why top players are always working out now. A strong body makes a solid foundation for techniques. I’m really feeling that right now.*

“Whoooa?! Natsu! You’re super awesome!” Uta yelled.

I snapped out of my thoughts to find that everyone else was worked up. Uta’s eyes were twinkling and she was moving in closer to me. Everyone seemed blown away.

“W-Wow, Natsuki. Is basketball your hobby?” Even Reita looked astonished.

Of course they’re surprised, I thought. A basketball newbie who’s never been in a club just made two three-pointers in a row. “Yeah, something like that. Oh, did I never mention it?” I tried to play it cool.

“You didn’t! Wowww, that was great! Why aren’t you in the basketball club?!” Uta was piling on the praise and getting a little too close for comfort. I could smell a sweet fragrance coming from her and it made my heart thump. I was forced to admit that even though Uta was childlike, she really was a girl.

“Oh, well, I’ve never been in a club before...”

“And you’re this good?! You’re a genius!” she said.

I need to squash that weird notion, pronto! I can’t tell them about my redo, but I’m obviously not a beginner. Miori will know I’m lying if I say I was in the basketball club in middle school. Also, Tatsuya has probably played against my

school multiple times, so he definitely knows I wasn't part of Mizumi's team.

I pulled myself together and came up with an excuse. "There's a park with a basketball hoop near my home. I messed around there a lot."

Technically it wasn't a lie. I really had practiced there a lot the first time around. I didn't want to lie to them, so I'd selected my words carefully.

"You've gotta join the basketball club! Right, Tatsu?!" Uta exclaimed with even more energy. She cocked her head to the side when he didn't respond. "Tatsu?"

I followed her gaze and saw that Tatsuya was looking at me with narrowed eyes.

"Uh, T-Tatsuya? What's up?" I asked.

Tatsuya breathed in sharply and covered up his glare with a wide grin. "Ah, nothing. I was so surprised I just froze up. You're a real beast, man."

O-Oh. He's just surprised. I was worried for a moment there. That scared me!

"Admittedly, it's even more fun since it's been a while." I dribbled the ball closer to the hoop and did a layup. My leg strength had increased so I jumped higher than I expected and it was easier to get in. *Yeah, this feels great!*

"Right?! So join the basketball club! Now!" Uta encouraged me, albeit aggressively.

"H-Hmm... The basketball club, huh? But I've got no experience, you know?"

"You'll be fine! And you've only missed a week of practice, so you'll get used to it lickety-split!"

Uta would take one step forward, causing me to take one step back. As we played at this little back-and-forth, thoughts raced through my head. *How do I decline? The basketball club, ugh, I just know it'll be a bed of nails! I can behave better now, but I'll probably be a benchwarmer and never appear in a match, just like last time...*

"Oh, right, I'm going to get a part-time job, so I think it'll be kinda hard for me," I said, remembering.

“What? Really? What a waste of talent. Right, Tatsu?” Uta turned to Tatsuya for support.

Tatsuya was casually spinning a ball on his finger as he said, “Well, we won’t know unless we see him play for real. He’s definitely good for an amateur but I dunno if that’s enough to pass in *our* club. Oh, I got it. Why don’t I test you out?” Tatsuya tossed his ball to Uta and beckoned me over.

“Let’s play one-on-one. First to three wins!” Tatsuya challenged me, smiling brazenly. His grin oozed self-confidence in a way that suited him well. And it was backed up by his skills. Tatsuya *was* Ryomei’s ace.

However, that wouldn’t be until his third year. *Maybe I can beat Tatsuya now, when he’s still just a first-year who’s barely started practicing with high schoolers. Though I was only a sub for all three years of high school, I do have that experience under my belt, and I regularly practiced shooting for all four years of college! Tatsuya’s only been playing since middle school; I’ve got tons more experience on him now.*

“Sounds like fun. Let’s do it,” I accepted. Though I tried to sound humorous, I was shaking in my boots. I was scared of facing Tatsuya one-on-one.

Come on! Didn’t I resolve to live up to Reita’s expectations? It’s time to get over my past trauma. This is just outright rude to Tatsuya! He hasn’t done anything wrong. If I want to overcome this, I need to stand my ground here and beat him.

I dribbled the ball up and down, calm and relaxed, as if I could charge in at any moment.

“Get him, Natsu!” Uta cheered. “Give Tatsu a good whooping!”

“Natsuki-kun, you can do it!” Hoshimiya cheered as well. Everyone was watching our match.

“Hey! Is no one gonna cheer for me?!” Tatsuya barked.

“Think of it as a handicap since you’re on the basketball team,” I said with a grin.

“I guess that’s how it’s gotta be,” Tatsuya sighed, scratching his head.

When I glanced to the side where the chairs were, my eyes met Hoshimiya's. She was smiling with her fist raised up to her chest, a little gesture that must've been to cheer for me. *I gotta show her my good side here.*

"You ready?"

"Come at me," Tatsuya replied.

Four years had passed since I'd played with someone else, but I instinctually remembered the sensation. And even better, my body was much stronger than before. It moved exactly—no, it moved *even faster* than I wanted.

I instantly switched from a standing dribble and crossed Tatsuya up. I nimbly broke past his right and scored an easy layup.

"What the hell... Seriously, dude?"

You didn't need any other fancy techniques if your footwork was superior. A simple drive forward was plenty—it was your greatest weapon. Tatsuya had taught me that in the past.

He was most likely wary of three-pointers. That made sense, since I'd scored two in a row just now. Because of that, he was defending me closely, which had made it easy for me to slip past him.

"You're up." I passed the ball to Tatsuya for his offense.

As soon as he caught the ball, he faked to the right and then drove towards the left. But I predicted he would. It was Tatsuya's favorite attack pattern, after all. I'd practiced with him for three whole years; I was familiar with all of his habits. I knew he would approach from the left when I saw him fake to the right and so I stuck out my left hand. The ball met my hand with perfect timing and I hit it out of its bounce and secured it for myself.

"What?!" Tatsuya yelled in surprise. "Was that luck?"

I blocked his best move before he even got to use it. Of course he's surprised.

"I guess you could say half of it was intuition."

It was my turn on offense again. I did a fake to the right, dribbled between my legs and passed him on the left, but Tatsuya caught up to me this time with those muscles he was so proud of. But I wouldn't lose when it came to brawn

right now. I considered powering through into a shot but instead spun to the right for a hook shot. My hook shots on the right weren't particularly accurate but I somehow made it in.

For the record, I was even worse at hook shots on the left, and I was so terrible at fadeaway shots that I didn't even want to mention them. I had confidence that I could keep up in a contest of strength, but I didn't have much practice with power dribbling. Basically, the shot I'd made just now was cutting it close, but Tatsuya didn't know my strengths or weaknesses, so he had to consider a lot of options. That's why he was one step too slow. And it was the opposite for me, since I was very familiar with his playstyle.

"That's two," I said with a light smile.

Thought so. I wouldn't stand a chance against third-year Tatsuya, but first-year Tatsuya has lots of flaws. Even someone talentless like me can stand a chance with enough experience and by reading his habits. Well, Tatsuya was always bad at defense, so that's part of it.

But, to make up for his weak defense, his offense was—

"You better not underestimate me. I'm playin' seriously now," Tatsuya said as he took the ball.

Fast! And agile. He drove past me before I could so much as move. I couldn't react at all, even though I'd predicted he would come from the right. *Tatsuya's drive has always been insanely low to the court... I'm forever impressed by how well he can control that huge body of his.*

Did he unconsciously realize I was reading his habits and decide to just move so fast I wouldn't be able to react? If so, I have to hand it to our ace. His instinct and talent is in a league of its own.

But I won't let you have this one! I want to show off in front of Hoshimiya and...for once, just one time, I want to defeat you.

I had played the same position as Tatsuya, a power forward, and since I was his substitute, I'd never once appeared in an official match. Tatsuya had remained friends with me until the very last moment. He'd stuck up for me until literally everyone hated me, even though I was a cocky bastard. After I became

isolated, the only reason I wasn't bullied and the only reason I could stay on the basketball team at all was all thanks to Tatsuya.

He'd been the ace and captain of the team, someone who stood so high up on the social ladder, and yet he didn't let anyone trash-talk me. He'd hated me and never spoke to me unless he had to, but he never did anything to kick me off the team. Not once.

My youth was gray. It's all thanks to Tatsuya that it never got any worse than that. My past could've been completely shrouded in darkness. Thank you, Tatsuya.

"Here's the third. Let's go, Tatsuya."

The reason I was so scared of him wasn't because he'd forced me to realize my high school debut was a flop, but because he was too dazzling.

That's why I shy away from him. Because I don't think we're equals. I'm scared he'll hate me again. And that...that's probably true for everyone. I'm scared everyone here will hate me again. Reita, Uta, Hoshimiya, and Nanase... All of them are kinder, funnier, cooler, and cuter than me. I can't even compete. They're just so blindingly bright. That's why I'm scared of them even though I love them so much, and it just so happens it's most apparent in my actions towards Tatsuya.

I can't help it. The reason I wanted to go back to high school so badly...

The reason I worked so hard to be a popular kid even though I know I don't deserve it...

...was because I wanted to be friends with you! I know that the rainbow-colored youth I want to snatch up must have you in it. Right here, right now, I'll overcome my past trauma and defeat Tatsuya!

It's time. Through the legs, drive to the right. Spin and cut in, then dribble as if you're hesitating and turn. Now then, how should I attack next? But my body was already dancing through the air as I planned my attack in my head. There are times you've gotta take a shot before you finish thinking in order to make it.

My body moved in one fluid motion and, with a flick of my wrist, the ball went flying in once more without touching the hoop. Swish! The net swayed gently a third time. It was the perfect play since Tatsuya had become vigilant of my drive.

“Hell yeah!” I cheered. *I won! I scored three first so there’s no point in Tatsuya going again. He can only get up to two baskets here so there’s no chance for a tie.*

“Shit! Are you serious?” Tatsuya yelled out in frustration.

The two of us collapsed onto the court. I thought I had plenty of energy to spare, but I realized my breathing was ragged. *Playing so seriously really takes it out of you.* I started sweating profusely as if my body suddenly remembered it needed to do that.



“That was awesome! Nice one, Natsu!” Uta charged at me, her energy maxed out. She grabbed my hands and pulled at me, trying to get me to stand up. I complied and got off my butt. As soon as I did, she intertwined her fingers with mine and began waving both of our hands with a hum. We looked like a two-person circle.

“Woo-hoo! Yaaay! Victory! By a landslide!” she cheered.

“Wh-Whoo, thanks,” I stammered. It didn’t matter how genuine Uta was being—the rapid beating of my heart was telling a different story. *Cheerful people are always getting too up close and personal; it’s bad for my heart!* With my hands in her control, Uta spun us around and around in a circle. Thankfully, Tatsuya tore her off of me eventually.

He held Uta’s shoulders with both hands and asked her, “Aren’t you even a little bit sad that I lost?”

“Tatsu, you’re so uncool! You lost to an amateur! Who would’ve thought?! I didn’t, that’s for sure!”

“Huuuh?! Then you face him!”

“Ehh, but I’m a girl, just a fragile little girl. Look at how big he is compared to me.”

“You only act like a girl when it’s handy...” Tatsuya disapprovingly clicked his tongue and released her. He turned back to me with a serious look. I met his gaze without flinching. I was finally able to face him undaunted.

This one-on-one had been my ritual to prove that we were friends on equal footing.

There still aren’t a lot of things I can beat Tatsuya at. With his talent in basketball, he’ll easily overtake me soon, but this was a me problem in the first place. I feel like I’ve drawn closer to the super dazzling Nagiura Tatsuya, just a bit, so this is enough for me.

“So, Natsuki. I think you’d do great... Will ya join the team?”

“No, sorry, man.” I no longer felt any lingering attachment to the basketball club.

Looks like I'm over my trauma. I'm aiming for a vibrant world, and I'm gonna walk a new path in high school to get there. I won't follow my steps from the past. Perhaps Tatsuya had sensed my resolve, but he didn't press any further.

"Hey, guys! We're almost out of time!" Hoshimiya called out to us. I looked at the clock. It was already 4 p.m. We'd bought the three-hour pack a little after one, so our time was just about up.

Reita clapped his hands lightly to grab our attention. "All right, sorry, I'm sure you're both tired, but we need to hurry up and leave."

Outside the Spor-Cha, we were welcomed by a cool, pleasant breeze. Today was somewhat cooler, perfect for my overheated self. I absentmindedly thought about the refreshing weather as I downed a sports drink.

"Aah, I exercised so much today!" Hoshimiya said.

"Hikari, you seem very energetic," Nanase commented.

"Well, why are you still so listless, Yuino-chan? We rested for so long at the end."

"Heh... You think my body would recover after such a short break?"

"You okay, Nanase? Your personality is off," I said with genuine concern.

Nanase turned red and muttered, "It was a joke..."

I thought she lost sight of her identity. Happens to me too. I used to be a boring, quiet introvert, after all.

"You've got way too much stamina for someone in the go home club. And here I thought we were comrades," Nanase said while staring at me hard.

I smirked at her in reply.

"All right, we shouldn't hang around in front of the store. Let's move." Reita directed us away.

"Move? Move where?" Tatsuya asked, tilting his head questioningly.

"Do you guys want to eat dinner somewhere together? Let's pick a restaurant and go in. It's a bit early since it's only four, but we can take the time to chat,

right?” Reita suggested.

“Sounds good and all, but I don’t have much money,” Tatsuya said.

“Oh! I want to go somewhere with a drink bar!” Uta chimed in.

While Reita was thinking about the location, I pointed to the other side of the street. “How about that family restaurant? It’s cheap and it’s close.”

I was pointing to a Saize, a chain restaurant known for its affordable eats. That had been my favorite place to eat in college. It was cheap, the food was tasty, and I didn’t feel out of place going there alone. Plus there was a bit of everything on the menu.

“Good idea. Let’s do that,” Reita agreed. And so, we all headed to Saize.

Reita really is the decision maker of this group. He doesn’t sound bossy or yell at us, though. Maybe it’s because he speaks up at the right times? Everyone respects him, and he’s very attentive. He doesn’t force his own opinion on others and instead takes everyone else’s opinions into account before making suggestions. I continued pondering Reita’s social skills all the way to the restaurant.

Saize was pretty empty, probably because of the early hour. A server led us to our seats, and we each ordered our food and access to the drink bar. I was super hungry because of all the exercising so I ordered two dishes, a Milan-style doria and spaghetti aglio e olio. I was a growing teen so I’d gobble it all up easily.

I got two things but it’s only six hundred yen! I can always count on Saize. Well, it’s more than that if you include the drink bar...but it’s still a price that a high schooler’s grateful for!

“Let’s make a toast to celebrate the start of school!” Uta said after we all got back from the drink bar. She raised her cup in the air and we all followed along. *This is kinda embarrassing; there are people staring. Well, it’s a bunch of high schoolers toasting with soft drinks so they probably just think it’s heartwarming.*

Reita smiled wryly and said, “Is that why we hung out today?”

“I just decided that it is! We’re celebrating the start of school! And that we’re

all friends!”

Hoshimiya said with a small smile, “I’m impressed you can say that without getting embarrassed, Uta-chan.”

“Is that bad?” Uta asked, head tilted slightly.

Hoshimiya petted Uta’s head gently. “No, it’s good. You’re so cute.”

“You’re cute too, Hikari,” Yuino cut in and petted Hoshimiya’s head.

“Huh? What’re you doing, Yuino-chan?!”

Hmm... Am I witnessing a yuri moment? I had a feeling I was about to awaken something sleeping deep within me, but if it did wake up, I likely wouldn’t be able to date Hoshimiya. So I snapped myself out of my fantasy and came back to reality. *Wh-What was that just now?*

“Whew! This is tasty! Soda’s the best!” Uta said happily after gulping down her melon soda. Then, she suddenly looked back at me as if she’d remembered something. “So, Natsu, you’re not gonna join the basketball club?”

“Nah. Sorry,” I replied.

“I see. That’s a bummer, but oh well!” Uta said. Her tone was a bit glum.

“Hey, why’re you so pushy about him joinin’ the club?” Tatsuya asked, puzzled. “You’re on the girls’ team; it’s got nothing to do with you.”

“What? That’s so mean, Tatsu! We’re basketball buddies!” Uta growled with displeasure and glared at him.

I feel like the atmosphere is turning sour because of me, so let’s change the topic.

“I’m not joining a club because I want to get a part-time job. I’m broke. But I’m still lost on where to work. Any ideas?” I blurted out my current number one worry. Okay, it wasn’t really a worry per se, but it was something I was mulling over right now.

This is new. I’ve never asked my friends for advice before. I’ve always made decisions after thinking alone...because I had no one to ask.

“Oh, a job, huh? I’ve never had one before so I’ve got no clue,” Tatsuya said

and sipped his cola.

“I know, right?” I agreed.

“How about a common option like this sort of family restaurant?” Reita suggested.

“Other places I can think of working at are a convenience store, a karaoke place, Mister Donut, fast-food places like McD’s, a café, an izakaya, and gyudon chains like Yoshigyū,” Hoshimiya listed off quickly.

“Yeah, I was thinking of that too.” I nodded. I appreciated their suggestions, though I had already considered them. *Welp, looks like I’ve thought of basically everything a person could think of. I already worked a job in college before, unlike them. I’d better think more on my—*

“Why don’t you work where I do?” Nanase interrupted my thoughts with a suggestion. She stirred the ice in her coffee around with a little clink.

The air had frozen up as soon as she said that. Finally, Hoshimiya spoke up, holding her hand up to her forehead. “Huh? Did I mishear you? Yuino-chan, you’ve got a job?”

“I do. I work at a café near here.”

“I didn’t know that!”

“Of course not. I never told you,” Nanase said bluntly while petting Hoshimiya on the head. “I started working over spring break and, well, explaining seemed like it’d be annoying so I kept quiet.”

“That’s why you never told me?!”

“Besides, Hikari, if I told you, wouldn’t you come every day?”

“Not every day! I don’t have the money.”

Nanase gave her a look. “So are you saying you’d come as long as your wallet allowed it?”

Reita chuckled at that. Hoshimiya kept silent, not sure how to answer Nanase’s loaded question.

“I only work twice a week because I’ve got lessons too. The manager is having

trouble since we're lacking hands; that's why I'm asking," Nanase explained. "If you've got time to spare, Haibara-kun, why don't you try interviewing with us?"

"Oooh." I thought for a moment. "You said the café was nearby?"

"Yes, it's called Café Mares. Their sweets have been quite popular recently."

"Oh! I've been there before! Wow, Yui-Yui works there!" Uta exclaimed.

I looked the place up on my phone and saw that it was a nice café with a pleasant-looking atmosphere. *I used to go to cafés alone to read back in college so I'm already quite fond of them. Also, Nanase works there, making it a great opportunity to get closer to someone in the group. Sounds like a good proposition.*

"Whoa, this might be a great deal," I said.

"Right? The hourly pay and the work aren't bad either." Nanase smiled proudly. *She looks cute when she's happy,* I thought quietly.

"I'll check it out and then decide if I want your referral."

I was interested, but I didn't want to interview with a café I'd never been to. Hence why I'd responded like that. *It's not something I can start right this second, anyway.*

In the meantime, Hoshimiya was still in a daze due to Nanase hiding such an important piece of info from her.

"Hey, Hikari? How long are you going to feel down?" Nanase asked.

After a pause, Hoshimiya replied sadly, "You hid your part-time job from me because you hated the idea of me visiting you at work, and yet you easily told Natsuki-kun about it because he's looking for a job. How can I be happy?"

When she says it like that, I can't help but agree. Wait, huh?! I-Is she bothered by me?!

"I was going to tell you eventually. Of course I would! It just happened to be that now was the perfect time," Nanase said calmly while twirling her pretty black hair around her fingers.

Cool as a cucumber, as usual. She doesn't look sorry at all... I stopped myself

right there. *Ack, don't think like that! I got carried away. My bad.*

"Thank you for waiting!" A server brought our long-awaited meal, thankfully interrupting the conversation. Afterwards, we chatted about class and the like while finishing our food.

When our conversation died down for a moment, Hoshimiya said regretfully, "It's about time for me to go home." She put her hands together in an apologetic gesture. "I'm sorry, everyone. My family gets naggy when it comes to my curfew..."

"Oh, it's already seven. I didn't notice. What a surprise," I said.

We chatted for three hours. It felt like time flew by because we were having fun. Hoshimiya had told her parents that she'd be eating out for dinner, but they would worry if she wasn't home before eight.

"All right, let's all go home then. I have practice tomorrow too," Reita said. Urged by his words, we all went our separate ways, marking the end of our fun weekend hangout.

I want to hang out with everyone like this again, I thought sincerely.

That same day while I was on my way home, my phone rang just as I was exiting the train. The number displayed on the screen wasn't one I had saved, but I recognized it all the same.

"Do you need something?" I asked after picking up.

"Tsk, tsk. Your tone sounds quite dark, Natsuki. Did you mess up?" I heard a familiar voice through the phone. I had just spoken with her yesterday, after all. It was Motomiya Miori.

Did she call to ask about how the clothes she picked out for me went over? Nah, she just sounds amused. Well, to be fair, I'd be curious too if someone close to me was taking a stab at their high school debut.

"People don't normally pick up the phone with a bright, happy voice," I replied, trying to stay as calm as possible. *You'd definitely tease me if I sounded happy picking up a call from you.*

"If you're saying that, does that mean it went well?"

I paused for a moment and then said, "I had fun." I was having mixed feelings about how easily she was reading me from my replies.

"Well then, you should be thanking me!"

"I would've thanked you honestly, but when you call me like this and demand it from me, the feelings of gratitude kinda fly away, you know..."

"Ah ha ha! Oh, you! You're the type of guy to say, 'I was just about to!' when your mom nags you to study."

"Shut up!" *I don't like the way you see right through me! This is getting annoying.* I calmed myself down. "Well, you know, thanks. It's thanks to you I got through it without making a fool of myself."

"You're welcome." Miori answered my honest gratitude in a kind tone, without any teasing.

That makes me feel kinda... Well, it's fine and all. My skin's crawling, though.

"Are you home already?" she asked.

"No, I'm on my way back. I'm about to leave the station."

"Oh, perfect. Wait there for ten minutes."

"Hey, that's not so perfect for me, you know," I rebutted, but she'd already hung up. *I can't believe she just hung up after saying what she wanted to! Wait, does she always assume I have no option to refuse?*

Feeling like I didn't have much of a choice, I leaned on a pole near the ticket gates and spaced out as I watched people walk by.

"Oh, there you are! 'Sup!" A girl wearing a white hoodie and a black miniskirt came out of one of the gates. The outfit was simple, but it accentuated her excellent figure. My eyes unwittingly flew to her thighs.

Isn't that skirt too short? I would not allow that if I were her dad!

"Sup..." I casually greeted her with as few words as possible while my brain was in turmoil.

"What are you staring at? Did you fall for me again?" Miori asked with an

alluring smile. She licked her lips, bringing my attention to how luscious they were.

“I’ve never fallen for you, not now and not in the past either,” I said, shooting her down.

“What, no way! Really?”

“Why on earth do you think I’m lying? You were just a brat commander back then.”

“Grr... I thought for sure you were blown away by my manliness.”

“Does that make me the woman then?”

“Ah ha ha! I’m kidding. It’s just a joke.” As she laughed loudly, Miori began walking off. I followed behind her.

“Anyway, what were you doing today?” I asked her.

“We didn’t have practice so I hung out with my middle school friends. You know, the Sayu and Kana crowd.”

Yeah, I remember those names. They were in the popular kids group of my class. I doubt they remember my name, so I can’t even call them acquaintances.

“Hmm,” I replied with a nonanswer.

“You don’t sound very interested even though you asked me first. You won’t be popular like that, you know?” Miori chided, giving me the stink eye.

“Ugh.” I wanted to object but I was at a loss for words. The old me would’ve had plenty of rebuttals since I never used to care about my popularity, but now my goal was to get Hoshimiya to like me. I needed to become popular with girls; I couldn’t stay like this. Finally I asked, “Then what should I do?”

“You just need to respond properly. Answer in a tone that shows you’re interested in what they have to say.”

“I see.”

“That does show you’re interested, but it doesn’t help the conversation flow. You gotta say things like, ‘Yeah, yeah,’ or, ‘Oh, I totally get that!’ or, ‘That sounds great!’ to keep the conversation going.”

“Yeah, yeah. That sounds great!” I parroted.

“Oh my god! It’s bad if you respond with the wrong thing. That’s a dead giveaway you’re not paying attention. Got it? Jeez, you’re so proper in front of other people, but when it’s just me you turn into such a sourpuss.” Miori shrugged her shoulders with a sigh. “Good grief.”

“There’s no point in keeping up an act around someone who knew me from middle school.”

“I see; so that’s what you’re thinking,” Miori replied in a serious tone and patted me on the shoulders.

I know you’re Miori and all but I still get nervous from physical contact with girls so please stop that already!

“Look, a vending machine.” Miori pointed at the one she was currently staring at.

Oh, the memories! I used to use that one a lot because you could buy juice from it for one hundred yen or less. “You’re almost home,” I said. “Just drink something when you get there.”

“Didn’t I pick those clothes out for you? Treat me to a drink! ♪” she said with a sweet smile.

I don’t mind if that’s all, I thought. I inserted a hundred-yen coin into the vending machine, and Miori selected a carton of strawberry orange juice without hesitation.

“Thanks!”

“You always buy one of those. That hasn’t changed,” I said.

For some reason, Miori stopped as soon as I said that. “Hm? Why did I pick this?”

“What the heck are you saying?” *Are you going crazy?*

“You know, I do like strawberry orange juice, but I haven’t drank it much lately. I guess I was feeling it, like back in the old days. Or perhaps my old habits have resurfaced?”

“Oh, I kinda get what you mean,” I replied half-heartedly while buying a can of black coffee.

“Hey! You’re supposed to follow your old habits here too.”

“I don’t remember what I used to drink!” *I’ve got an extra seven years of memories clouding me up, after all.*

“You always used to drink this apple juice.”

“Really? I’m surprised you remember.”

“Cause it costs one hundred like mine but it’s a little bigger and in a can. You always used to insist that it was more valuable. And anyway, why do you only remember what I used to drink?”

That does sound like an argument I’d make as a kid. One hundred yen was a lot to me back then. “Well, you used to like anything if it had strawberries in it. That was all you cared about.”

“I’m kinda pissed off for some reason.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re drinking black coffee so now it feels like you’re an adult.”

There wouldn’t be so much suffering in this world if all you needed to be an adult was to drink black coffee... I drank so much coffee in college that it stopped tasting bitter, though.

“Oh well, people change,” Miori said. She stepped away and started taking pictures of me with her smartphone without even asking permission.

“That’s my line.” *Who would’ve thought that Commander Miori of the Shorts-Wearing Youngsters would turn into such a feminine girl,* I thought. “Hey, stop taking photos of me!”

“Oh, come on. Your look is a product of my work.”

“You better not post it on Minsta. I’ll make you pay a fee if you do.”

“Ah ha ha! You think you’re a model now just because you’re a little better looking?”

“Now listen, you...”

“Anyway, what did they all think?”

“They didn’t really react.” I paused, and the moment when Hoshimiya had complimented me flashed through my mind. “Well, I did get a compliment.” *Ah, crap, I think I’m grinning.*

“Oh? Good for you. You went to a Spor-Cha, right?”

“Yeah, and I had plenty of stamina thanks to my training so...” I continued talking about my day, and before I knew it we were in front of my house.

Huh? Why did I blab about my whole day? I even told her about my morning. Miori’s replies had been so perfect, so natural, that I couldn’t help but keep talking.

“All righty, see you later, Natsuki. You better tell me if something interesting’s going on, okay?” Miori said with a grin and headed home.

M-Miori... She’s much more formidable than I originally thought!

Five days later on a Thursday after school, Nanase came over to my desk after she’d finished packing her bag. “Well then, let’s go, Haibara-kun,” she said.

Is it just me or did everyone freak out when she walked over and said that?

“Yeah.” I nodded and got up from my seat to head out with Nanase. The other four had run off to their clubs as soon as homeroom was over. *Even Hoshimiya’s gone off to the literature club.*

“You’re going to have to go through the interview, but it’s just for formalities,” Nanase explained. The two of us were on our way to her workplace, Café Mares. She had a shift today, and I was going for my interview.

Two days after our Saturday hangout, I’d visited Café Mares alone and taken a liking to its calm atmosphere. So I had asked Nanase to refer me.

“With your personality, I think you’ll pass without trouble, Haibara-kun.”

“If so, that’d be nice,” I replied.

I wonder how much of my real personality Nanase has truly grasped? I’d imagine my true self doesn’t give off an interview-passing impression. Well, I’m

sure I'll manage to find a job if push comes to shove, but I have failed interviews before, back when I was job hunting as a college senior. When I inevitably got rejected from thirty different companies, I wondered if it was time to dig myself a hole to lie in. Somehow in the end, I did get an informal offer. Not that it means anything since I get to redo my past. No regrets there, though.

"So they need help in the kitchen?" I asked.

"The dining room floor needs help too, but the kitchen needs it more," she answered.

"What position do you work, Nanase?"

"I work in the dining area. I'm not proud of it but I can't cook."

"Are you just saying that?" I asked, doubtful.

"Is it that unexpected?" she replied.

"Well, you just seem like you can do anything."

"I get that a lot. But unlike what everyone imagines, I'm a very normal girl. I know a little about tea ceremony and calligraphy because I took lessons in the past."

"Yeah, I think recently I've grown to understand that about you more."

Nanase looked conflicted for a moment and then said, "I'm none too pleased that you accepted that so easily."

"Well, aren't you a difficult one!" I quipped.

Nanase giggled. The elegant way she covered her mouth with her hand not only suggested a proper upbringing but also just plain looked adorable. *Nanase, you... Any more of that and I might end up stanning you! She acts like a cool beauty, but she's actually a normal girl on the inside. Is that not just the strongest trope?*

"All right, let's go," Nanase started, but then she noticed me ogling her and tilted her head to the side. "Huh? What's wrong?"

The gap between her dignified face and a cute head tilt like that is just too adorable, I thought, but I said aloud, "Oh, uh, it's nothing."

Wh-Whew... I stared too intently. I feel like I'm gradually becoming an idol otaku in spirit for Nanase. I don't want to date her or anything. How do I put it? I just want to stan Nanase. Ah, forget it; I just want her to live a happy life!

Nanase continued our conversation, unaware of my serious yet creepy thoughts. "Haibara-kun, you want to work in the kitchen, right?"

"Hmm. Working the floor sounds good too, but I'm cool with the kitchen if they're lacking staff there." I really was fine either way. But if I had to pick one, I was definitely more inclined to work the kitchen because, as an introvert, speaking with strangers was way more mentally taxing than working behind the scenes.

"How good are you at cooking?"

"How good? That's hard to answer." I hesitated. I'd lived alone in college and had a lot of free time, so I ended up studying cooking for fun. I'd watched all sorts of cooking videos on YouTube, looked up recipes online, and braved a new dish every day. *I basically never left home except to go to class, so I had all the time in the world to experiment in the kitchen. Ha ha ha! They say cooking is a pain, but leaving home is a way bigger pain to me! I mean, I don't ever want to leave my house. Staying indoors forever is perfect for my lifestyle.*

Nanase nodded cheerfully at my reply, oblivious to the reclusive monologue in my head. "Heh, I know what you mean."

"Well, I'm probably good enough to work in a café. I've cooked a decent amount at home before, so I'm sure I can whip up something tasty—though I've gone through a lot of trial and error," I said. *And besides, I worked at a café before in college. I can make most things on your average café menu and handle working the floor too.*

"Oh? You sound quite confident. Looks like I'll have something to look forward to."

"But will I even have the chance to cook for you, Nanase?"

"I go there often enough as a guest. Maybe I'll go when you're on the clock," she said, smiling mischievously.

Once we got to Café Mares, I took the interview and passed it without issue. We also discussed my shifts; I would come in three times a week after school, from 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. Saturdays I'd get called in ad hoc if needed.

"Well then, I'll be counting on you starting next week," said the manager, a kindhearted-looking elderly man. *That gentle smile is truly becoming. I'm glad the manager isn't scary; I'd make more mistakes working under an intimidating boss out of fear.*

"Oh! You're a handsome one. Are you the new guy?" A blonde girl casually called out to me as she walked into the restaurant.

A college student? I wondered. *Looks like another employee, judging by how nonchalantly she walked behind the counter.*

"I'll be starting next week. I'm Haibara Natsuki."

"Nice to meetcha, Natsuki-kun. I'm Kirishima Mika. I'm a first-year in college." She casually offered me a handshake, and I realized something right away.

I know what this is... This is how an extrovert initiates physical contact!

"Oh, right, wasn't there someone Yuino wanted to bring in too?" Kirishima-san asked, remembering.

I was about to answer, but Nanase spoke up first. "Yes, that would be Haibara-kun," she said while cleaning the dining area.

Kirishima-san looked at Nanase with a grin and whispered in my ear, "By the way, are you her boyfriend?"

"I can hear you. He's not my boyfriend," Nanase said, exasperated.

"I'm not talking to you; I'm talking to *him* right now. Right, Natsuki-kun?"

"Unfortunately, I'm not her boyfriend. Though I'd love to have a girlfriend like Nanase," I replied with a shrug.

"Oho? Hmmm? Hear that, Yuino?" Kirishima-san sounded like she was having fun.

Hm? I was trying to be honest, but did that just come off as creepy instead?

"So what? Please don't tease me," Nanase responded indifferently, keeping

her back towards us as she continued cleaning.

“Hey, Kirishima! Don’t pick on the new hires. Hurry up and get to work.” The manager called her out with a dry smile.

“Okaaaay,” Kirishima replied grudgingly and disappeared into the staff room.

Nanase is working already, so I should go home for today. “All right then, Nanase, see you tomorrow,” I said.

“Yeah, see you tomorrow,” she said after a short pause. Then she added, “Let’s work hard together.”

And just like that, I’d found a part-time job. Starting next week, I would have the new experience of balancing high school and work.

Back when I’d first started living alone, I used to eat out all the time. But having to leave home to buy my meals got annoying fast, so I started eating cup ramen instead. Eventually, I got bored of that so I began cooking.

Cooking for myself was easy. In order to make a decent meal, all I needed to do was get the ingredients, chop them up, and then boil, grill, or fry the food. After I got those steps down, I just needed to figure out when and how much to season each dish.

But that was only a simple meal for myself—it wasn’t presentable for other people. *I don’t mind if my creation is a flop, but meals served at a restaurant are a different story. If you’re getting paid to cook, you have to serve something worth the customer’s money,* I thought. *I was really worried about that when I started my café job. It’s a given, but you have to follow their recipes, no freestyling allowed.*

Back then, I had gotten used to cooking for money after three months of working. Restaurants didn’t change their menus much, so I just had to memorize their recipes; I could even put my own spin on stuff sometimes.

“Natsuki-kuuun! A Napolitan, please,” Kirishima called out.

“Okay, coming up.” I confirmed that I’d heard her and started cooking.

While I boiled spaghetti in a pot of salt water, I cut up onions, bell peppers,

and mushrooms. Next, I mixed ketchup with other seasonings and then stir-fried the chopped-up ingredients in a pan. I then drained the water from the pasta and combined it with the vegetable and ketchup mixtures before finally sautéing it all on high heat. *One Haibara-style Napolitan completed! Well, I made it the standard way, but I seasoned it to my liking.* Each menu item at Café Mares had a recipe to follow, but they allowed some deviation as you pleased, which felt very rewarding. *Ah, this is fun!*

“Kirishima-san, Napolitan’s done!” I called out.

“Oh, that was fast! I’ll take it out, then!”

On my first day working in the kitchen, the manager tasted my food before sending it out to the customers as a sort of mini-test, but I passed without a problem (he actually showered me with praise!). After two days of that, I started working in full capacity without any training wheels. *I’ve pretty much learned the ropes already.*

“You know, you’re pretty good at this, Natsuki-kun. Are you sure you haven’t worked a job before?” Kirishima asked merrily after delivering the Napolitan.

There were only two customers right now. The café got pretty packed during rush hour, but on off-hours, it was usually pretty empty, so idle chatter was permitted. Now was one of those peaceful times.

“Nope, though I have cooked at home before,” I replied.

“Well, sure! But I never woulda thought that your cooking skills would earn our manager’s stamp of approval on your first day. You’ve settled in so quickly that it’s kinda spooky. Yuino, you did a great job bringing in a genius like him. You deserve a star!” Kirishima said to Nanase, who was counting the money in the register.

“Just so you know, I had no idea he’d be this competent,” Nanase answered and shot me a look full of mixed feelings.

Did I do something? I wondered.

Nanase continued. “It took me a whole month to learn everything to work the floor.” Her eyes narrowed into a glare.

You sound upset by it, but I think that's normal, I thought.

“Yuino, you learned super fast! Natsuki-kun is the weird one here!”

I know you're saying that to praise me, but being called “weird” by a fashionable college student feels like a stab to the heart. Still, she's right that I'm just your classic weirdo, introverted high school student... Heh heh heh...

“It's true. Haibara-kun is very reliable. I'm counting on you,” the manager said as he came out of the back and patted me on the shoulder.

You're all laying on the praise, but guys, I've actually got two years of experience working for a café! I'm just doing the basics, so I feel conflicted about this. But if I told everyone that, it'd sound like a lie. They'd just need to look into it a teeny bit to see that there's no proof.

“Not at all,” I denied. “This isn't much.”

“Haibara-kun, you always act so modest. It wouldn't hurt to be a bit more conceited,” Nanase said.

But I'd be ashamed if I acted cocky just because of this! I may be an incompetent, gloomy bastard, but even someone like me would excel at a few things when I've got an extra seven years of experience on everyone else my age. It's an advantage of time traveling.

“Nah, I'm not anything special. I can only cook because of the people who taught me.” I wasn't trying to be humble or anything. I was just trying to hide the truth behind an ambiguous smile.

The door chime's timely ringing saved me from any more of that topic. Nanase immediately headed to the dining area to greet the customer. *All right, time to finish washing up all those dishes,* I thought and got ready to tackle the pile.

“Heyo, Yui-Yui! I came to play!” A familiar voice interrupted my thoughts.

She's so loud. I looked out towards the entrance with a sinking feeling and saw a familiar trio. Our latest guests were Uta, Tatsuya, and Reita.

“Hey, Nanase. Where's Natsuki?” Tatsuya asked while looking around the café. He spotted me in the back and his eyes grew wide. “Huh? You're working

in the kitchen?!”

“Let me show you to your seats. This way, please,” Nanase said. She was clearly embarrassed, but she still followed the manual to a T. *It’s hard to tell if it’s okay to speak casually, or if you should follow the manual when your friends show up at work. I feel you, kind of.*

Tatsuya and Uta wearily sank into their seats. *They must be tired after practice*, I surmised.

Amused by their state, Reita came up to Nanase and me to apologize with a smile on his face. “We had a little chat after we heard you two mention during lunch that your shifts would line up today. We thought it’d be fun to drop by for a surprise visit after practice,” he explained in an attempt to pacify Nanase. “Did we get you?”

“You surprised me! Can you tell me in advance next time?” Nanase said, pouting.

I was working in the kitchen so I couldn’t join in, but the manager noticed and said, “Why don’t you go talk to them? They’re your friends, right?”

“Huh? Is that okay?” I replied in surprise.



“Yes, there aren’t many customers today.”

“Thank you! I won’t talk for long.” I bowed and walked over to where Uta and the rest were seated.

“Sup! Did you come to give us more work?” I said.

“What? Way to be mean! Natsu, aren’t you happy we came to visit?” Uta bleated.

“Not particularly. We were together the whole day at school,” I replied seriously.

“Grr!” Uta let out a displeased growl and puffed up her cheeks. “Natsu, are you happy right now?!”

“Y-Yeah?” I stammered. *Why’s she being so pushy? And her face is way too close to mine.* I backed away from her.

“Are you happy to be friends with me?” she pressed.

I was taken aback by how bluntly she was interrogating me, and I instinctively averted my gaze. I nodded. “W-Well...sure, in a way.”

“Do you have fun at school with us?”

“Yeah, it’s fun.”

“Then you’re having fun now, right?! You’re happy to see me, yeah?!”

I looked at her, bewildered. “Uh-huh...?” *I don’t think that logic checks out, but I can’t tell her that! If I do, her beaming smile will disappear. She’s beaming at me so hard I can see stars in her eyes. How could I destroy her happiness? I’m such a weak man.* “Yeah, I guess so. You’re right. Let’s just go with that!”

“Yaaay!” She cheered and raised her hand for a high five.

“Y-Yaaay!” I somehow managed to high-five her without missing. *This is bad. I can’t keep up with her energy! It’s the peppy kid special: hyper conversation!*

After a pause, Nanase commented, “You two sure are close.”

“Of course we are! Natsu and I are suuuper close!” Uta stood up and tried to put her arm around my shoulder.

Hey, what'd I say about getting too close?! I thought, but I went with the flow anyway and bent down so that she could get her arm around.

Uta's too close. She's soft. I thought her chest was flat as a board, but I was wrong. She's definitely a girl, I realized. Also, why does she smell so nice? Didn't she come here after practice?

Uta made a peace sign at Nanase, completely oblivious to the disturbance within me. "Yaaay! Yui-Yui, take a pic of us!"

"Hey, wai—" Nanase's phone clicked as she snapped a picture of us before I could stop either of them. *I guess I don't really mind! But my heart can't keep up, so I need a break sometimes! Also, Nanase, weren't you too prepared for that? You were already opening the camera app, weren't you?*

Nanase saw the accusatory look I was sending her and smiled. "I was thinking it'd be a good pic for Minsta."

"Can't you use a normal picture? This one's kinda..." I trailed off.

"Kinda what?" Nanase asked with a devilish smile.

Well, you know, it's, uh, err... Doesn't it look like we're dating or something? Am I being too self-conscious? Is this normal in the world of extroverts?

"Um, hey, Yui-Yui," Uta started. "Can you use a different photo? Oh, I know! Let's all take one together!"

"Oh, really? If you say so, Sakura-san." Nanase readily accepted Uta's suggestion while my inner turmoil was still ongoing.

Uta probably wasn't thinking anything petty like me. She just wanted to take a picture with everyone.

"Come on, guys! Get close!" Uta exclaimed as she set her phone camera to selfie mode and raised it up. I had no choice but to get close to her again because of how little the camera could capture. The five of us huddled together to get inside the frame. After Uta took a selfie of us, she sent it to our RINE group.

I heard my phone chime and opened it to check the picture. Sure enough, all five of us were captured nicely in the photo. *I kinda... I kinda feel happy about*

this. I couldn't help but smile. It's like a fun memory's been etched into this one picture. I used to think that taking pictures was worthless...but that's not true!

"Oh, look, look! Hikarin sent a message!" Uta said. I closed the photo and went back to our group chat.

Hoshimiya had sent, "No fair, you guys!" to the group, along with a sticker of an angry person.

"Huh? Come to think of it, why isn't Hoshimiya with you guys?" I asked.

"We invited her, but she couldn't stay out late because of her curfew. Also, the literature club ends earlier than sports clubs, so the timing didn't work out," Reita explained.

"Ah, yeah, that's rough."

Uta sent back "I know, right!" to Hoshimiya.

What a heartwarming sight, I thought.

"I want to post it on my Minsta too. Is that okay?" Nanase asked for permission. We all nodded, myself included.

"Oh yeah, Nanase, we're not friends on Minsta. What's your account name?" I asked.

"Oh? I didn't know you were on Minsta," she replied.

"I just made one, so I don't have any followers on it or anything."

"How sad! All right, can't be helped; I'll follow you."

"Ah! Me too! Add me too!" Uta jumped in.

"Same here. Tatsuya, you don't use Minsta, right?" Reita asked.

"No, I have one, but only to see what's up. Posting stuff is a pain in the ass," Tatsuya replied.

And just like that, I became connected to everyone on Minsta. I already knew the rest of them were on there from our conversations, so I'd felt left out and sad. And so I had made my own a few days ago.

I was only a little sad! Really, just a tad. Besides, all the popular kids are on

Minsta these days. Last time around, I only followed otaku accounts on Twister...

Anyway, since I was finally part of the Minsta fun, I opened Nanase's post of the picture we'd just taken. Underneath the pic of the five of us was a short caption: "Everyone came to visit me at work ≡ thanks~~! #CaféMares"

I stared at it for a moment and then said, "Who the heck wrote this?!"

"Wh-What? Is there a problem?" Nanase huffed and turned away, cheeks slightly flushed.

"Ah ha ha! Yui-Yui's completely different on Minsta! Isn't it funny?" Uta teased.

"I'm used to it now, but I was shocked when I first saw her Minsta," Reita said with a wry smile.

"Oh! Hey, hey, Yui-Yui! Doesn't Natsu work in the kitchen?" Uta suddenly asked.

"Yes," Nanase confirmed.

"Does that mean if we order something right now, Natsu will cook it for us?"

"That's right."

"Oy, don't give me more work to do," I protested.

"Unfortunately for you, I already told my mom that I would be eating out for dinner today," Reita said. "I'll go hungry if you don't cook something up for me, Natsuki. I want a pasta dish, so make me whatever you're confident in."

"I have dinner waiting for me at home, so I want something light. Whatever you recommend, Natsu!" Uta exclaimed.

"I'm good with anything, as long as there's a lot of it," Tatsuya directed at me.

"Don't come to a café expecting large portions..." *If you want that from a café, go to Komeda.* Regardless, I returned to the kitchen with a smile on my face.

When I looked towards the manager, he nodded back amicably. He already knew what I wanted to ask. It was as if he was telling me, "They're your friends;

make whatever you'd like!"

It's nice how flexible privately owned stores are. This'll be fun!

"All right, what to make..." I mumbled. *My friends came all the way here, so I want to make them something tasty, I thought. Oh man, I feel the nerves. I've made food for customers before, but never for my friends. Because I didn't have any friends to cook for. Yes, I know, very obvious.*

"What're you going to make?" Nanase asked me.

"Just watch! I'm going to show you my serious mode."

"I don't mind, but don't change too much or else you'll get in trouble, okay?"

Good point. It wouldn't be good if I diverged too much from the menu. I also need to keep the cost in mind. There are a few other customers, so I don't want to take too long either.

Hmm. All right, I'm itching to start.

Nanase carried off the dishes I'd just finished cooking.

"Wow! It looks good!" Uta said gleefully. She was loud as always, but the other customers had left while I was cooking, so I figured it was fine.

For Reita, I'd made a seafood pasta soup since he had requested a pasta dish. Since Uta liked sweets, I made her pancakes with plenty of whipped cream on top. And for Tatsuya, I made a large helping of omurice because he only cared about volume.

All I did was add my own touch to existing menu items, but they're made the way I like 'em. I wonder if they'll like them too. I... I'm feeling nervous! I held my breath and stared at everybody. Uta took the first bite and then blinked a few times in wordless surprise. She ate a second bite, then had a third, and continued eating silently. *What do you think?!* I cried out in my heart anxiously. Tatsuya and Reita also began eating their food.

I mustered up the courage and asked for their thoughts. "H-How is it?" However, none of them answered for some reason. *Oh no, is it bad?*

“It’s...” Uta started.

“It’s?” I repeated, urging her to continue.

“It’s super tasty!” she yelled in delight.

Reita calmly scolded Uta for getting too worked up in the café. “Uta, you’re bothering other people in here. Speak with your indoor voice.” He paused for a moment and then turned to me. “But I agree with her. Who would’ve thought you could cook something this tasty! I’ve come here before, so I’m guessing this is your personal take on the recipes?”

“Yeah. I ignored the store’s recipe this time and made your food my way. Keep it a secret,” I answered and put a finger to my lips. *Though I doubt the manager will get mad.*

“It’s delicious! Really, really tasty! Natsu, you’re super awesome!” Uta fussed over the food, but in a quieter tone this time because of Reita’s warning.

I get happy when you eat it like it’s the best thing ever. I’m glad I cooked it for you! I thought.

Tatsuya was busy shoving omurice into his mouth, but he took a moment to mumble out “delish” between bites.

“I want to try yours too! Tatsu, give me a bite!” Uta said, her twinkling eyes locked on his omurice. She opened her mouth.

Is she telling Tatsuya to feed her? In public, in front of other people like an extrovert? Oh, right, she is an extrovert. I’m the only one here who isn’t outgoing, I thought to myself. *Though, there are different types of extroverts.*

Unexpectedly, Tatsuya reacted like a person with common sense. “Huh?” he muttered, at a loss for words, and then turned away, perhaps in annoyance. “Who’d do such an embarrassing thing? If you want to try it, then take some yourself,” he said and put his spoon down.

Uta picked up the spoon without a care. “Okay, don’t mind if I do!” She took a bite. “Wow! This is great too!”

The three of them shared their food and happily chowed down. *I don’t think pancakes go well with the other dishes... Ah, whatever. Uta looks happy so*

that's all that matters. I noticed Nanase gulp beside me. I bet she wants to try too. Well, I'm also hungry. Let's tease her a bit. A-All right... Time to give it a shot!

I tapped Nanase on the shoulder and asked her with a grin, "You wanna try some?"

"W-Well..." She thought for a moment. "I'm on shift, though. I know; I'll have you make my meal today."

"Sure, no problem. Leave it to me!" I pounded my fist to my chest. Nice, I spoke to her cheerfully! Plus, I successfully touched her without it being awkward. It's amazing that extroverts can do this like it's as easy as breathing.

I, on the other hand, was terrible at judging when I was close enough to someone to touch them casually. Tapping Nanase's shoulder had taken a lot of grit even though we were on close terms (though this was just my own presumption). *It'd suck if I miscalculated how close we were and made them uncomfortable. It's better to lean on the cautious side.*

After my exchange with Nanase, a realization suddenly hit me. *Is it just me, or has Tatsuya been oddly quiet today?*

But before I could talk to him, Kirishima bonked me on the head from behind and interjected, "Hey now, you're too loud! There's still work to do even if there aren't any other customers."

Yeah, I realized, even though we're the only ones here, we're being a bit too loud.

"Yes, ma'am," Nanase and I replied unenthusiastically. We reluctantly got back to work.

"Hey, you just started working here, right?" Tatsuya asked me coolly after I'd turned away.

"Hm? Yeah, that's right," I replied.

"And you're already perfectly settled..."

"Oh, well, my parents taught me how to cook before, is all," I answered with a shrug.

Tatsuya continued to shovel food down his throat and said, “Still, you’re amazing. You really can do anything, Natsuki.” His compliment made me overjoyed.

Then, the door opened with a ring of the bell and another customer came in. Nanase and I walked away from the trio’s table. The café became busy soon after, so Uta and co. headed out.

It was almost 11 p.m. when I got home from my shift. I was about to take a bath and then hit the hay, but my phone chimed. I checked it and saw that Hoshimiya had messaged me. I thought for a moment it was in our group chat, but it was a private message.

Hoshimiya Hikari: Is it true you cooked for everyone?!

Oh, right, Hoshimiya couldn’t come today, so she’s been sulking on RINE. Anyway, I should reply to confirm first. Besides, sure, I cooked, but it was just normal restaurant food.

Natsuki: Yeeep

Hoshimiya Hikari: What, no fair! I want to try your cooking too!

Natsuki: I’ll cook whatever you want if you come to the cafe lol

Hoshimiya Hikari: I’m definitely coming next time!

Natsuki: It’s nothing special, don’t expect so much lol

Hoshimiya Hikari: Ehh, liaaar. I saw the picture Uta-chan posted on her story and it looked really tasty you know?

I opened Minsta to check and saw that Uta had posted a picture of her meal. *When did she take this? And wow, this is a great picture! It really makes the food look good.*

Natsuki: Oh wow, I see it. When the heck did she do this?

Hoshimiya Hikari: I’m hungry now because I looked again

Natsuki: I know right lol maybe I'll eat a cup ramen or something

Hoshimiya Hikari: Uh, hello, that's cruel you know?! I'm on a diet right now!

Natsuki: Really? You don't look like you'd need to

Hoshimiya Hikari: I'm worried about the places you can't see!

Natsuki: Late night cup ramen's the best you know?

Though they do make you feel sick... Well, I joked about it but I'm not actually going to eat one. I've finally got a build I'm proud of, so I don't want to gain any fat I can avoid.

Hoshimiya Hikari: Natsuki-kun you're not allowed to either!

Natsuki: You're being unreasonable

Hoshimiya Hikari: It's bad for your health

Natsuki: All right, I guess I've got no choice

A few minutes passed with no reply. I'm getting anxious. Did I screw up? Should I have started talking about a different topic? I finally got a RINE message from Hoshimiya, so I want to keep talking for as long as possible. I thought about so much while texting, but she was probably just replying to go with the flow.

After a while longer, I saw that Hoshimiya had finally read my message. She replied, "It's time for bed! See you tomorrow!" and our conversation ended. I knew she had to go because it was late, but I couldn't help but feel a little down.

Chapter 3: Perfect to a Fault

Two weeks had passed since the day Uta and the gang had visited Nanase and me at our part-time job.

“—and so starting from today, all club activities will be halted. Study hard, everyone.” Our teacher finally wrapped up a long and boring lecture and ended homeroom. Midterms were drawing near, in exactly one week’s time.

Ryomei High followed Japan’s general education curriculum and aimed to get its students into college. Therefore, we would be tested on the nine compulsory subjects: Japanese, Japanese classics, world history, Japanese history, mathematics, English, physics, biology, and chemistry—nothing unusual. Our finals would also test us on information processing, home economics, as well as health and phys ed, but those were problems for later.

The nine subjects would be split into three tests per day from Monday to Wednesday. We would take them in the morning, and then, once we were finished, we’d be free to go home for the afternoon. In the past, I would happily go home and read light novels.

I recalled what used to happen during test season. *“I’ve got time to spare, so it’s fine if I spend some of it reading light novels,”* I’d say to myself, and then I would read until late at night. I would always end up taking my tests without studying and subsequently fail. But because everyone around me had always said things like, “Ah crap, I didn’t study at all!” and, “Yeah, same here!” I was lulled into a false sense of security. *Those were dark days. I didn’t really feel betrayed back then. Though it’s not like they could have betrayed me. We weren’t friends in the first place. Ha ha ha.*

“Ugh, I hate tests. I don’t understand a lick of it! Nothing at all!” Uta grumbled from the seat in front of me.

“Don’t worry; you’ve still got a whole week,” I reassured her.

“I haven’t been paying attention in class, so there’s no way I’ll learn

everything in a week!”

“I don’t think you should be proud of that...” I advised her.

Reita said something from behind me. “Uta, you know the tests at this school are quite difficult, right? If you’re not going to listen during class, then you should be studying properly on your own. Otherwise, you’re going to be in the red across the board.”

“Aah, aah! I’m not listening!” Uta covered her ears with her hands and shook her head.

No, really, Reita’s right, I thought. I struggled a lot back then. But hey, I’ve experienced this once before, so I should have it easier than them. I’d better support everyone else.

“I’m finally free of practices from hell!” Tatsuya fist pumped as he walked over.

“What? I like practice way more than taking tests! Tatsu, don’t you think you’re lacking passion for basketball? Stop looking so happy!” Uta berated him.

“Idiot, you can only be happy-go-lucky about practice because you’ve never experienced the boys’ practice! When I think about how hard I’m going to be worked for a whole year...” Tatsuya shuddered. “Crap, I’m getting the shivers just thinking about it.”

“Uh, isn’t that trauma at this point?” I quipped.

Tatsuya hugged his arms and said with a pale face, “I’m telling you, it’s no joke.”

“Well, you’re on the court next to ours so I’ve seen it, but the girls’ practice is just as tough, you know?” Uta asserted.

“Hah. Are you for real? That stuff is just child’s play.”

“What’d you say?! I can’t ignore that!”

“Okay, okay, stop there, you two.” Reita stepped in to mediate their dispute as usual.

Do they get along or not? I really can’t tell sometimes when they glare so

intensely at each other, I thought.

Tatsuya clapped his hands to change the topic and said brightly, “All right, guys! Let’s go play!” Coming from him, the tone was way too perky.

Tatsuya was grinning as we all stared at him in silence. Even Uta was giving him a dry smile. Feeling like he had to take responsibility and represent the rest of us, Reita broke the news to Tatsuya. “Uh, no, we can’t.”

“Huh?! Are you stupid? What do you think all this free time is for?!”

“St-Studying?” Hoshimiya spoke up timidly from out of nowhere.

“Studying, you say?” Tatsuya repeated the word like it was foreign, but his expression was completely serious.

Why are you reacting like that’s the craziest suggestion ever?

“Tatsuya, you weren’t going to take the tests without studying, were you?” Reita asked.

“Oh, come on, Reita! Don’t you think you’re selling me short here?” Tatsuya replied with a snort. We all let out a sigh of relief, but he kept going. “I was going to skim the textbooks morning of.”

H-He’s hopeless... I have to do something fast, or else... Come to think of it, wasn’t Tatsuya like this last time around too? How were his grades—no, it’s better left unremembered.

“Guys.” Reita looked at the rest of us, extremely serious. “Let’s have a study group. No, please help me out. I’m begging you guys. Please.” I had never heard anyone ask a favor in such a grim tone before.

Somewhat taken aback by the tone of Reita’s voice, Hoshimiya, Nanase, and I could only nod.

“All right, then. Let’s start with the stuff you two don’t understand,” Reita said to Uta and Tatsuya. We were borrowing an empty classroom for our group study session.

The usual six. That’s right; I’m a member of the group... Six means I’m

included. Heh heh heh.

Anyway, we'd pushed six desks together to make one giant table for us to sit around. Initially, I wasn't sure if it would be okay to just grab an empty classroom, but Reita had asked for permission. *Flawless as always. A classroom makes sense. You have to be quiet in the library, so it'd be hard to teach them in there. Plus, Uta and Tatsuya are pretty loud, and we'd likely get kicked out.*

"What I don't understand? Even if you ask me to think about what I don't know..." Uta turned to Tatsuya. "You get what I mean?"

"I don't know what I don't know!" Tatsuya said, finishing her earlier statement with a nod.

I feel that! Wait, no. They're so lively considering the bleak situation.

Hoshimiya and Nanase quietly studied while Reita was trying to work with Uta and Tatsuya. Compared to Nanase, who was easily solving math problem after math problem, Hoshimiya was struggling in distress over one question. *What a lovely sight! I should help her out to score some points.*

"Hoshimiya, you should reread the question one more time. That one's slightly different from the previous question," I hinted.

"Huh? Okay. Uh..." Hoshimiya stopped her calculations so she could examine the question again. On the final exam during my first time around, I'd also bungled the problem she was stuck on. That's why I immediately knew how to help her.

"Oh, I get it!" she exclaimed.

I took out our math textbook and explained the example problem. "That's right. So here, you're supposed to do it like this..." After my explanation, Hoshimiya understood how to solve the problem. She wrote down the formula and easily reached the answer.

"I did it! Is this right?" Hoshimiya sounded happy but unsure at the same time and tilted her head to the side.

I gave her a big nod. "Yep, that's right."

"Yay! Thanks, Natsuki-kun!"

Her smile obliterated me, and I blanked out for a moment. *Huh?! Where am I? Who am I? H-Hold up, calm down, be cool!*

“Natsuki-kun?” Hoshimiya called my name, interrupting the awkward silence.

“Oh, uh, it’s nothing.”

“Really? Okay then, I’ll keep going.”

Wh-Whew, that was close. Hoshimiya’s smile has so much destructive force behind it that my brain stopped functioning. No, it’s not just her smile. I’ve seen her smile plenty of times before. It’s because that smile was for me, and it was to thank me on top of that. Of course I would suffer from temporary memory loss! I mustn’t forget that smile, though. Never.

“Don’t tell me, Natsu—are you smart?” Uta leaned forward on her desk and asked after she saw our little exchange.

“I don’t know about smart, but I at least pay attention in class,” I replied.

“Whaaat?! That’s not fair!” she grumbled.

“Uh, what’s not fair? That’s the basic prerequisite of being a student...”

“Okay, then, look here! Do you get this question?” She pushed a problem into my face.

“Let’s see...” I looked at the problem she was pointing at and froze.

That’s a basic math problem. We learned how to do this on the second day of class! Oh no. This is worse than I thought.

Hoshimiya understood the fundamentals but had merely gotten tripped up on how to apply them. She was similar to how I’d been in the past. Hoshimiya seemed like the type of student to properly pay attention in class but not study much at home. *She’s not that smart, so she gets stuck on applying the methods and probably ends up settling for seventy points on tests.*

However, with the way Uta was, she’d likely score zero points on the exam. She didn’t even understand how to solve the math problems that were essentially designed to be free points.

“You two... You’re both done for if you try to do things the way you did in

middle school, got it?” Reita chided Uta and Tatsuya while rubbing his forehead.

Finally picking up on his impending doom from our expressions, Tatsuya asked in complete seriousness, “Is it... Is it really that bad? How different are high school tests?”

“In the first place, Tatsuya, Uta, the two of you only passed the entrance exam because you worked extra hard to raise your grades last minute. I figured you two would be behind in the beginning, but neither of you have even been paying any attention in class.”

“T-True.” Tatsuya looked rattled. “It was a fluke that I was accepted...”

“Ah ha ha! Tatsu’s stupid after all!” Uta chortled.

“You’re the only one I don’t want to hear that from, shorty! I’m better than you; at least I hand in my homework!”

At this point, you two are pretty much just having a pissing contest, I thought to myself. It was for the best that I didn’t say it aloud.

“Stop squabbling and start studying. In case you didn’t know, you have to take supplementary lessons for each subject you fail, and then retake the tests until you pass. That means you can’t go to your clubs after school *until you pass*,” Reita pointed out.

“Eh?” Tatsuya stared at him blankly. “Are you serious?”

“Ah ha ha ha ha... No way that’s true. You’re joking, right? That...that can’t be true. Right?” Uta tried to laugh it off, but we could hear her nervousness increasing with each word.

The two of them paled when they realized Reita wasn’t joking.

I spoke up, trying to offer them tidbits of advice from my previous experience. “For now, the subjects you definitely won’t pass if you don’t start studying are math and, uh, physics and English. The rest you can scrape by if you cram overnight.”

Reita nodded. “The amount of homework and problems we had for those subjects was no joke from the get-go. You’d better start practicing solving math problems. You’ll never finish unless you work on them every day. Start here.”

With that, all of us began studying diligently.

Tatsuya and Uta had excellent focus once they hunkered down and began studying. The two of them grappled with their math textbooks while working through the problems, and I could see how they'd been able to get into this school through intense cramming. However, no matter how fervently they studied, they'd inevitably hit problems they couldn't solve alone. *Reita's helping Tatsuya and Nanase's helping Hoshimiya right now. Does that mean I'm in charge of Uta?*

I'd been teaching Hoshimiya up until Nanase had snatched that job from my hands. *Ah well, I bet those two have been like that since their middle school days. The atmosphere between them speaks of a deep history.*

"Hmmm," I mumbled, pretending to struggle on a problem. In reality, I had time to spare and nothing much to do. *Not gonna lie, I already understand all the math here. My weak points are the classes requiring memorization, like Japanese history or world history. It's been a while, so I've forgotten most of it. I bet I can cram it back into my head in a night, though.*

My thoughts were interrupted by a pained "ugh" from Uta. She was holding her head and groaning, so I decided to reach out to her. "Which part are you stuck on?"

"Natsu, you're gonna teach me?" she asked.

"Of course. Only if I get it myself, though," I replied. She looked apologetic for taking up my own studying time. *For someone with little regard for personal bubbles, you sure pick up on some subtle aspects of social etiquette. Wait, maybe this delicate balance of physical closeness and emotional consideration is an important part of being a popular extrovert. Gotta make a mental note of that!*

"Don't worry about me. Tutoring you will be a good review for me too," I reassured her with a cheerful smile.

"I see!" Uta responded, grinning broadly.

I've always been bad at reading people's emotions, so thank goodness she's easy to understand, I thought.

“Okay, so I don’t know how it goes from this to this...” Uta showed me the example problem that was stumping her in the textbook.

Looks like she was using the book’s example as a reference to solve a similar problem, but she doesn’t get how they went from this part to the formula here. I know how you feel. Sometimes textbooks leave out too much work, and you end up confused about how they jumped from the problem to a whole different-looking formula. Darn textbook writers, trying to cut down on their page count!

“There’s actually a step that happens in between here and here, and then you get this formula from the book...” I began to break it down, writing the intermediary steps for Uta in her notebook. *What’s the best way to explain this so she’ll get it? Maybe it’ll be fine if I explain it to her like how I did to Hoshimiya, or maybe...* My brain whirled as I tried my best to explain the solution.

Okay, there. Did Uta understand? I wondered after finishing my explanation. I looked up to check on her, only to find that our faces were so close that our noses were practically touching and our eyes met. Her large doe eyes captivated me, stopping my train of thought. I could only stare, practically bewitched by her charming features.

“Huh?” I finally mumbled. *How long have we been staring at each other?*

“Oh... Uh, sorry!” Uta forced her eyes back to her notes. I could see from the side that her cheeks and ears were dyed scarlet.

Is... Is she embarrassed? Or am I reading her wrong? Wait, is she feeling conscious that I’m a guy? No, no, cool it! Anyone would get shy if they made point-blank eye contact with the opposite gender. I just never would’ve pinned Uta as the type to turn bright red like that since she’s always getting up close to everyone without a care. That gap just threw me for a loop. That’s all. My heart was pounding hard. *Ah man, this is awkward! I don’t know what to say, but it’ll only be more awkward if I stay quiet.*

“Yeah, so, uh, does that make sense?” I managed to wring out.

“Um! Y-Yeah! Thanks!” Uta replied.

Is it just me, or does her voice sound higher than normal?

“Hey, if you’re just gonna flirt then do it somewhere we can’t see,” Tatsuya called us out, annoyed. He was obviously talking about Uta and me since we were acting so weird.

We’re not actually flirting, but I would say the same if I were Tatsuya, I reasoned.

“He was just teaching me, you know? Right?” Uta refuted.

“Y-Yeah,” I agreed. “Honest.”

“Whatever, I don’t give a crap,” Tatsuya said with a sigh. He returned to studying in an even grumpier mood.

Yeah, my bad. I’d be annoyed too if I were trying to concentrate on my studies, and a couple was flirting nearby...

I glanced furtively at Hoshimiya, but she was concentrating on studying like normal. She didn’t look at all interested in what we were up to. *Of course not. Right... I thought maybe, just maybe, Hoshimiya would feel a liiittle bit jealous of Uta and me, but of course I was just being overly self-conscious as usual.*

I stopped myself there and got back to tutoring Uta. “All right. Ready for more?”

“Yeah!”

I switched gears and seriously focused on teaching Uta. *I may be an introvert, but I did have a part-time job as a home tutor at one point, so I’ve got experience and confidence in teaching people.*

Uta proved that her passing Ryomei’s entrance exam had been no fluke, and she actually did have the brains to back it up. She absorbed all the information I gave her like a sponge, so I enjoyed teaching her. By the end of our session, she’d managed to gain a decent understanding of everything in the first chapter of the textbook.

“Right then,” Reita spoke up as he eyed Uta, “it’s about time to wrap it up.”

I checked the time and saw that it was almost 8 p.m. and already dark outside.

“You’re right. It’s almost Hikari’s curfew too; we should go home,” Nanase

agreed.

“Yeah, I have to go now, but you guys can keep going,” Hoshimiya said.

“I’m exhausted from all the studying, so I’ll stop here and head home as well. What’ll the rest of you do?” Reita asked.

“We’re all here, so why don’t we head out together?” I suggested. *Though I just want an excuse to go home with Hoshimiya.*

“I can’t do this anymore!” Tatsuya moaned. “I’m never studying again...” He stood up and let out a loud, “Uraagh!”

What an ostentatious method of stress relief.

“I was starting to have fun understanding math thanks to Natsu, though.” Uta paused but then said, “Well, if Natsu leaves, then I will too. I won’t get anywhere on my own anyway!”

“Y-Yeah... I’m glad to hear I helped.” I nodded, pleased by her words.

We all started packing up our things when a thought struck me. *Huh? Wait, what? Was Uta indirectly asking me to stay back...? She said she’d go home if I went home, which means if I don’t go home, then neither will she. That sounds like a roundabout way of saying she doesn’t want to go home yet. But everyone else is leaving, so if I decided to stay, then that’d mean it’d just be me and Uta studying alone together. Is that what she was hoping for—okay, hold up! I’m overthinking it and being too self-conscious again. What’s up with me today?*

“All righty! Let’s blast off home!” Uta cheered energetically as she pushed Hoshimiya out of the classroom, disproving my conjecture. *Yeah, it was all in my head. I don’t think Uta’s someone I need to read that deeply into, anyway.*

“Wow, it’s pitch-black already. This is new for me!” Hoshimiya said as soon as we stepped out of the building.

“Really?” I asked.

“We see this every day after practice. The school at night, I mean,” Reita said.

“Oh, that’s right! Makes sense. The literature club never stays behind this late,” Hoshimiya said, a little excited. I’d expected Uta to join in and get pumped up with Hoshimiya, but she was carrying on a normal conversation

with Nanase.

I guess Uta is also used to leaving the school when it's dark out.

Hoshimiya seemed a bit lonely getting hyped up on her own so I agreed. "I know what you mean. Being at school at night feels kinda exciting."

"Right, I think so too! Yay, I have a buddy!" Hoshimiya replied enthusiastically.

In my case, this experience is nostalgic rather than novel. But I'm not lying when I say it's exciting. I can feel this way because I'm with these guys.

"Let's take a pic for Minsta since we're here!" Hoshimiya said. She raised her phone up and took a selfie of us. After checking the picture, she exclaimed, "Huh? You can't see anything in this!"

"Well, yeah. You're going to need to turn on the flash in this darkness," I replied logically. Hoshimiya glared at me for being right and then uploaded the picture to her story anyway. She captioned it, "With the crew at school at night! It's a fresh experience~! But you can't see a thing in the pic lol."

I checked out her story on my phone and grinned. *She's happy with something like this? Well, Minsta's not all about deep posts, so I guess anything goes. This is also kinda funny.*

"Hey, I thought you had a curfew to make?" I pointed out.

"Oh yeah! I don't have time for fooling around! Let's hurry home!" Hoshimiya exclaimed in realization and sped off. *She can be pretty absentminded, huh? That's cute, though.*



Weary from our study session, we all headed home together.

For the whole week before our exams, we all gathered each day in an empty classroom to diligently study and review together. I'd finished all the review problems, so I had nothing better to do than oversee Uta's studies. By the end of the week, she had reached the point where she wouldn't fail any subjects, and I felt relieved by her progress.

As far as I could tell from Reita's expression, Tatsuya was still in a pickle, though. He was especially struggling with math, his nemesis. In the latter half of the week, Nanase and I also took a stab at teaching Tatsuya, but it was quickly evident that he was in for a world of hurt if he went into the tests with his current level of understanding.

While we were all leaving school in the dark on Friday, the final day of our after-school study group, Tatsuya clapped his hands together and said with his head bowed, "Guys, please! Help me out over the weekend too!"

Seeing the normally confident Tatsuya lower his head like this was so surprising that we all oohed in unison. "Desperation setting in, huh?" I commented.

"Well, you know." He hesitated. "It's like, the more I learn, the more I realize how much hot water I'm in. Ya know?"

"Yeah, I feel that. When you don't know anything, you don't know how much you don't know," I said. *Ah man, that came out a tangled mess!*

"I don't care about failing, but it's a different story if I can't go to practice." Tatsuya paused. "I'll start paying attention in class from now on, but please help me out this time!"

"I'm still barely going to pass too. Please, everyone! Tatsu will buy you all juice!" Uta begged as well.

"Hey! Aren't you going to treat 'em too?" Tatsuya retorted.

"Oh, well, uh, I've been going out so much lately that I'm broke..." she replied sheepishly.

“Study more, dammit!” Tatsuya scolded. The rest of us shared a look and then broke into laughter over their banter.

“All right. We’ve got two days left. Who’s available? Let’s all meet up somewhere,” I suggested. “I don’t need juice or anything. You guys should drink up; you’ll need the brain sugar.” *Of course I’d help out my friends when they’re in trouble. I’ve got knowledge from my first run, and this is definitely the right way to use it,* I thought.

“That’s our Natsu!” Uta cheered. “You’re so nice!”

“Nah, not really. But we’re friends, right?” I said. *I don’t need compensation. Friends help each other out. Well, at least I think they do. I’ve never had friends this close before, but I’d like it if we were all close enough to feel that way.*

Uta looked at me. “Natsu, you say some embarrassing things with a straight face sometimes, you know?”

“Eh? Really?” I asked, starting to feel embarrassed. *But that’s what I think about you guys. Still, it looks like they feel the same way about me.* “S-Sorry. Was it gross?” I apologized, growing despondent.

“No.” Uta shook her head and then brought her face close to mine. She whispered sweetly right into my ear, “I think that part of you is super cool.”

Shaken by her words, my brain lagged for a moment. While I was malfunctioning, Uta had already returned to the others. She hugged Hoshimiya from behind and joined their conversation. She looked as if she’d already forgotten what she’d whispered in my ear.

I wish she’d stop joking around and playing with my heart that way... Is she actually a little devil type? I pondered the possibility that Uta was the kind of girl to get a kick out of teasing and mischievously flirting with people.

Tatsuya came up from behind me and threw his arm around my shoulder. “You two have been real close lately.”

“Doesn’t it only seem that way because I’m tutoring her?” I replied. *Who knows?* I truly had no idea what was going on, so I just gave Tatsuya a safe answer.

“Hey, do you like Uta?” he asked in a hushed tone.

“Huh?! No way, dude. No, not at all!” I answered, trying to keep a lid on both my volume and surprise.

“What? That’s no fun. Then do you like Hoshimiya? Or is it Nanase?” he grilled me.

I was at a loss on how to respond. *Tatsuya and I are friends, though. And I’ve always wanted to talk about crushes with my guy friends,* I admitted to myself. I decided it would be best to come clean, so I hesitantly whispered, “I like Hoshimiya.”

“Oho? I see; I see.” Tatsuya grinned widely as he rubbed his chin.

“All right then, what about you, Tatsuya?” I asked back.

He paused. “Me? Hm, what do you think?” He responded with a question.

“Hmm.” I took a moment to reflect upon Tatsuya’s behavior towards the girls. *It can’t be Uta—they fight like cats and dogs all the time. It doesn’t look like he’s crushing on Hoshimiya or Nanase either. He talks to them like he does everyone else.* Failing to come up with a conclusion, I just replied, “I dunno.”

“Right? Then let’s say that’s the answer.”

“What? Hey, I said who I liked. That’s dirty!”

“Hey man, you actually like someone, so you can’t help it.”

Uta suddenly popped out of nowhere, interrupting our banter. “Whatcha guys talking about?”

“Oh, it’s a secret,” I said. *I don’t want everyone to know I like Hoshimiya because I don’t want anyone to tell her. What if she started avoiding me? I’d hate that. In fact, I wouldn’t be able to stand it! That’d be a crappy way for my high school life to go.*

“Whaaat? Why is it a secret?!” she cried out.

“Sorry, Uta. It’s too soon for you. We’re having adult talk here.” Tatsuya covered for me. It looked like he’d picked up on my reasoning.

“Adult talk?” Uta mulled over the meaning of that, averted her eyes, and then asked shyly, “Oh, are you guys talking about lewd stuff?”

I was taken aback by her conclusion and tried to deny the accusation in a panic, but Tatsuya spoke up first. “Yeah, that’s right. It’s too soon for an elementary kiddo like you to hear about it.”

“Wh-Who’s in elementary school?! I mean, sure, I’m on the shorter side but...” Uta replied indignantly.

“Whoa now, you think it’s just because of your height?” Tatsuya mocked.

I nervously watched Tatsuya goad Uta. She stared at him blankly, but her expression slowly morphed into disgust when she realized what he was implying.

Uta hugged herself and shouted, “You pervert! I’m the only one who can say stuff like that!”

“My bad. Anyway, that’s what me and Natsuki were talking about. Now run along and go play.” Tatsuya shooed her away as if he was driving off an animal.

Uta glared at him and then at me, red-faced, before running off to Hoshimiya and the rest who were walking up ahead. *I feel like I got caught up in the cross fire...* I thought.

“Well, if I had to rank ‘em, it’d be Hoshimiya, Nanase, and then the flat wall that can’t be touched—Uta. Right, guys?” Tatsuya asked.

“Yeah. No, wait, hey...” I found myself agreeing but then tried to take it back.

“Dumbass, of course we’re going to talk about this. We’re guys! Right, Reita?”

“Nanase’s unexpectedly got some. She looks about average for her slender build at a glance, but I think she’s just the type that looks slim. And of course, Hoshimiya’s are just overwhelming.” Reita added his two cents with a straight face.

I didn’t know when, but he had left Hoshimiya and Nanase up front to join our group. *Makes sense. The street’s not wide enough for all of us to walk beside each other, so we’ve gotta talk in groups of two or three max—wait, that’s not important. What the heck did Reita just say in such a deadpan voice?*

“Hm? Natsuki, are you not interested in stuff like this?” Reita asked.

“No, uh, well, it’s not like I’m not interested in that, but...” I trailed off, unsure of what to say.

“Oy, Natsuki, can I tell Reita?” Tatsuya asked.

Tell him what? I wondered for a moment and then realized he was talking about my crush on Hoshimiya. I thought for a while and then said, “As long as you don’t tell the girls. You won’t tell them, right?”

“I got your back. Don’t sweat it, dude,” Tatsuya said.

“I’ve got an idea of what you guys were talking about. Don’t worry,” Reita reassured me. “I’m as tight-lipped as they come. I don’t know about Tatsuya, though.”

“I’m in a bind if Tatsuya can’t keep a secret,” I mumbled.

“Listen up, Reita. This guy’s after Hoshimiya’s huge tits.”

“Seriously? I see. They’re full of a man’s dreams, so I get how you feel,” Reita said.

“Guys, I don’t like Hoshimiya because of her boobs, you know.” Right as I tried to plead my case to them, I felt a cold, sharp stare on us.

The girls walking ahead of us were looking back at us with frigid eyes. *We were talking quietly, so there’s no way they overheard us. Oh, I bet Uta told them about what Tatsuya claimed to be our topic of choice.*

Hoshimiya puffed up her cheeks and turned away from us with a huff. “You shouldn’t be talking about things like that!”

“I don’t blame you guys. Hikari’s are so big, who wouldn’t be attracted to them? I think about them too,” Nanase mused.

“Yuino-chan?! Can you not say outrageous things like that so shamelessly?!” Hoshimiya admonished her, shocked.

“I... I... I drink milk every day, okay?!” Uta cried out.

Tatsuya, Reita, and I exchanged looks and grinned. *I’m still not sold on Tatsuya wrapping me up in this misunderstanding, but I’ll forgive it since this feels like a*

very teenage experience. I want to build up some resistance to dirty talk with the boys too. I don't have any history of sharing stuff like that with my friends, so it felt embarrassing talking about girls with them.

The next day was Saturday. I opened the door to Café Mares, and the chime rang to signal my entrance.

“Oh, you're here. Everyone else's already arrived,” Kirishima said as she walked over and pointed towards some seats in the back of the café. I looked in that direction when Uta noticed me and started waving wildly.

We'd spent some time discussing where would be the best place to study. Possible locations were someone's house, a family restaurant, and the library, but in the end, we'd decided that Café Mares would be the most ideal.

Five other people intruding upon someone's house for a study session felt like it'd be tight on space. A family restaurant on a weekend would likely be crowded and probably wouldn't have enough seats, and we couldn't exactly chat freely in a library. So since Nanase and I both worked at Café Mares, we figured it would be perfect because we could ask for seats ahead of time.

I had passed the idea to our manager first, and he'd gladly given us permission. Apparently it wasn't too busy during test season since students were off studying. “Just make sure to order drinks,” he'd said with a smile.

I headed over to where everyone was seated. *Hmm? Aren't there too many people?*

“Sup, Natsuki. You're late,” Tatsuya greeted me as he spun a pen.

“Sorry. The train stopped when— Wait, why are *you* here?” I cut off my explanation to ask.

“What's wrong? Am I not supposed to be here?” Miori giggled and smiled deviously. She was showing up so frequently that at this point I wondered if the cruel hand of fate was at play. “It was a coincidence. We also came here to study. Right?”

Miori and the blonde girl with piercings she'd been with at the club fair were

sitting at a table next to Tatsuya and co. The blonde gave me a sleepy nod of acknowledgment. “Yep, yep. Miori, you’ve got a lotta friends, huh?”

“He went to the same middle school as me, and unfortunately I can’t seem to get rid of him,” Miori replied.

During their exchange, I sat down at our table. The only seat available was the rightmost one on the window side—the one between Uta and Miori, who was seated at the table on our right. *Were they trying to be mindful of us or something?*

“Natsu, you’re Miorin’s childhood friend, right? That’s why we left this seat for you!” Uta said with her arms proudly folded.

Ah, whatever! And I see you’ve come up with a weird nickname for Miori too, I thought to myself. “Well, that was unnecessary.”

“Why?!” she replied, shocked.

Honestly, I don’t want anything to do with Miori when these guys are around. I don’t care how much she’s helping me; it’s embarrassing for her to see me now when she can compare it to the past me.

“Hmmm?” Miori hummed with a mischievous lilt.

See?! She’s always got her eye on me. Cut me some slack! I ignored her gaze and opened my notebook. “Uta, I summarized the main points that’ll be on the tests and topics that are likely to trip you up in here.”

“Huh?! What the? This is awesome!” Uta’s eyes widened as she flipped through the notebook.

“I know, right? I made it last night. I’m sleep-deprived thanks to that, though.” A yawn escaped from me as I spoke.

Compiling these notes was largely to blame for why I’d shown up late and was so tired today. After tutoring her for a whole week, I’d gotten a good grasp on what Uta’s weaknesses were for the upcoming exams, so I paraphrased everything in a way that would be easy for her to understand. I was so engrossed in my work that by the time I’d realized, it was already past 2 a.m.

Hoshimiya and Reita looked at the notebook with great interest. “Can I take a

look?” they both asked.

“Yeah, of course. I was planning on giving this to Uta,” I said.

“Eh? Really?!” Uta exclaimed.

“Yeah. These notes were tailored specifically for you.”

“Th-Thank you,” she replied unusually weakly.

Hoshimiya and Reita flipped through my notebook in the meantime.

“Whoa... This is great. It’s really easy to understand,” Hoshimiya said.

“Isn’t it, though? You couldn’t write this unless you understood the material very well,” Reita agreed.

They were laying on the praise, but I just scratched my head awkwardly. *The compliments make me happy, but I don’t know how to react. What can I say? Throughout my life, I haven’t been complimented or praised much. Ha ha ha...*

“Is there one tailored for me?” Hoshimiya asked.

I shook off my dark thoughts to answer her. “Should I make one?” *I say that, but I don’t think you need one*, I considered as an afterthought. *Hoshimiya’s good at Japanese and English but bad at math and physics. It’s fitting for someone in the literature club, but regardless, she’s got the basics down for science and math.*

“Ah ha ha, I was kidding. It’d take too much of your time. Natsuki-kun, when are you going to study if you make any more?”

“Yeah, that’s true. I already have my hands full taking care of Uta.” I shrugged.

When she heard that, Uta grew downcast and mumbled, “I’m sorry... Thank you.”

That was supposed to be a joke, but it looks like I hit a sore spot. I guess Uta’s worried that she’s been taking up my studying time. I used to make those notebooks all the time when I was a home tutor, so it really didn’t take me that long.

“I’d better show some good results after all the work you’ve put in for me, Natsu!” Uta clenched her fists in front of her chest, let out a determined grunt,

and then got to studying.

“Were you this smart in middle school?” Miori questioned me in a low voice.

“Shut it! I worked really hard to pass the entrance exam,” I whispered back.

“Really? Hard enough that you can teach everyone else, huh?” Miori asked. “I see; I see.”

I hesitated. “Is there a problem?”

“Not really. I just thought it was interesting.”

The two of us had been whispering back and forth so as not to disturb the others. However, Reita commented with a wry smile, “You two really are close, huh?”

Miori shoved my face away. *Hey, don't push other people's faces with your hands!*

“No way! But, you know, I want to get closer to you, Reita-kun. Oh, right! I don't understand this part here. Will you explain it to me if you've got time?” Miori moved her chair closer to Reita, who was sitting across from me.

I'm impressed by how proactive she is! She's blatantly announced that she wants to get closer to him, I thought. Miori asked Reita about the problem she supposedly didn't understand while their shoulders brushed together.

“Aren't you supposed to be smart?” I grumbled. *Wasn't she always ranked among the top ten in middle school?*

“Hm? Well, I think I'm smarter than you at least,” she replied.

“Do you *really* not understand that question?” I glanced at the problem she was asking for help on, and it looked like your average math problem. Sure, it seemed complicated at a glance, but it was actually a simple problem that could be easily solved by just applying the correct formula. There wasn't anything particularly challenging about it.

“Ehh, of course I don't understand it. Why else would I ask?” Miori replied, but the overwhelming pressure she was exuding told a different story: *Question me again, and I'll kill you.*

I decided it would be best not to push the subject any further. Luckily—or perhaps unluckily—Reita was preoccupied with solving the problem in question, so he hadn't been paying attention to our exchange too closely.

Miori was only talking to my group, so I felt bad for the blonde she'd come with. I peeked to the side to find that she was studying hard, contrary to what you'd assume based on her appearance. *It looks difficult to talk to her right now. I can see why Miori's hanging with us more... Okay, well, it's still mostly 'cause of Reita,* I thought.

"I really appreciate it, Reita-kun. I understand it *perfectly* thanks to you!" Miori thanked him with a smile and then returned to her original position.

She looked so pleased with herself that I couldn't help but ask dubiously, "Hey, was this whole thing really just a coincidence?"

"Rude! It really was a coincidence. I had no idea you guys were doing this," she whispered back.

"Yeah, I guess you wouldn't know."

"Anyway, aren't you going to help me? Do something so I can talk to Reita-kun more."

"Wouldn't it be faster for you to just initiate conversation rather than whatever weird intervention plan I could come up with?"

"He'll pull away if I come on too strong."

"Too late for that! You're already coming on strong."

"That's why I'm telling you to do something so I can join in. *Naturally.*"

"That's an unreasonable request," I grumbled. *How can you ask that of someone who just launched his high school debut?*

"Hey, Natsuki, can I have a moment?" Reita called out to me with a serious look.

Speak of the devil and something, something, or whatever, I thought. Then I asked, "What's up?"

"Well, you know. I'm not sure how to put it." Reita struggled to vocalize his

thoughts.

It's rare to see Reita being inarticulate. This is different, I thought.

He continued once he'd gathered his thoughts. "I don't think I'm good at teaching people."

"Ooh, well, you never really know," I tried to reassure him.

"Based on that response, I'm guessing you think so too." Reita sighed. He looked really bothered by it.

I did overhear a bit of his explanation when he was trying to teach Tatsuya. Not gonna lie, but it wasn't easy to understand, and it definitely wasn't very beginner-friendly. Reita didn't outline the problem he was showing Miori how to solve either. He just quickly solved it on his own without much explanation. Well, Miori's fine since she already knows how to do the problem. IMO, Reita's a genius. He just has an intuitive feel for how to solve things. He's got super smarts, which is great for him but...

"Honestly, I don't get what Tatsuya doesn't understand. What is there to be confused about? Everything looks so easy. I knew I was a genius, but I never thought that would shoot me in the foot one day... The difference between Tatsuya's intelligence and mine is just so vast that I can't help him," Reita said dolefully.

"Did you have to say all that?!" Tatsuya blurted out, astounded by how smoothly Reita threw shade at him even while earnestly worrying about his weakness.

"Dammit! Why am I so smart?!" Reita cried in frustration.

"Oh, shush! Just look at this man, suffering from success," I quipped.

Hoshimiya giggled and said, "So this is another side of Reita-kun. It's fun to see!" Her words instantly eased the tension in the air.

"He's hot *and* confident," Miori whispered wistfully. "I want to make him mine! I'll have one to go, please..."

I pretended like I hadn't heard her. *What the heck are you getting to go?*

"Anyway, that's why I'm sorry to ask this, but Natsuki, if you think Uta's in the

clear, can you lend Tatsuya a hand too?" Reita asked.

He probably can't ask Nanase because she's so engrossed in her studies. Her pen hadn't stopped moving once so she could join our conversation. She's got amazing concentration.

"Sure, that's fine with me. Honestly, I've got time to spare." I'd already reviewed all the subjects at home, so it really wasn't a problem. *Still, I can't believe he's bad at teaching... That's an unexpected weakness coming from someone as perfect as Reita.*

Suddenly, an idea struck me. *I'll throw Miori a bone here*, I thought. "All right then, let's swap seats, Reita."

"Hm? Oh, you're right. That'll be better for you," Reita agreed.

It'll be easier to teach Tatsuya if I'm sitting next to him. Plus, this way Reita will be sitting next to Miori, and it'll be easier for her to talk to him.

Miori looked at me, shooting me a silent, "Nice one!" with her eyes.

I grinned and prepared to get up, but Tatsuya stopped me. "Oh, I'm fine, Natsuki. Reita's already helped me a ton. I'll figure out the rest from here. Sure, it wasn't easy to understand, but I'm not gonna complain when he took the time to teach me," he said simply and returned to studying.

Was he being considerate of Reita? Tatsuya looked determined to work hard on his own, so I sat back down. *Uh-oh, Miori looks unhappy! But what else am I supposed to do?* Reita and I exchanged looks and smiled wryly at each other before returning to our studies.

After some time, Uta announced, "I'm going to the bathroom!" and left her seat. When she did, Miori leaned towards me and whispered in my ear, "Hey, hey."

Wondering what she wanted, I turned to face her to see that she was watching Uta walk away.

"Did you know? Lately, all Uta talks about is you," Miori whispered quietly so no one else could hear.

"Oh, right, you're both on the girls' basketball team," I replied flatly.

“Yep, we always walk home together after practice too. I feel like she gives off a different vibe lately, you know. Could be that she’s turning into a girl in love. I don’t know what magic tricks you pulled to do that, though!”

“Stop teasing me.”

“But I’m not teasing you.”

We’ve been getting along well, but I don’t remember doing anything that’d make anyone fall for me... No, maybe I have, but Uta is just the type to be close to people. Miori’s blowing things out of proportion! She was being all vague saying, “Could be that she’s turning into a girl in love,” anyway. That’s as unbelievable as when a company replies to your job app with, “We’ll get back to you after reviewing your application.”

“I’m just saying, as your fellow conspirator, that you and Uta will be an item for sure if you make a move now. What’ll you do? Or is Uta not your crush?” Miori’s whispers were as tempting as a siren’s song.

I gulped. Sakura Uta is cute. She’s definitely one of the top five cutest girls in our grade. She’s self-conscious about her shortness and childish figure, but I think that’s what’s so adorable about her. Plus, her energetic and cheerful personality is heartening to watch. I’m sure I’d be happy if we dated.

“Natsu?” Uta called my name, snapping me out of my delusions.

I jumped a little in surprise when the person in question showed up. “S-Sup, Uta? You’re back.”

“You sure talk to Miorin a lot. Whatcha guys talking about?” Uta replied, a beat slower than usual. Her tone was also quieter than normal.

What do I say? I can’t tell her we were just talking about her. No, maybe I can? I decided to be honest. “Err, we were talking about you, Uta.”

“M-Me?”

“Yeah. I was wondering what you were like during practice,” I said. I could see from my peripheral that Miori was giving me a thumbs-up for some reason, but I ignored her.

When I said that, Uta stopped pouting and turned away. “Hmm, I see. So

that's what it was about. That's fine, then."

Uta's expressive face is always easy to read, but I can't tell a thing when she looks away, I thought. For the time being, I went back into teaching mode and asked, "Okay, what do you need help with?"

"Ah, right. Over here. You wrote about it in your notebook, but..."

After Uta showed me the physics problem she was struggling with, I began to explain it to her. The fact that she can solve it up to here shows that she properly understands the basics. That's quite the improvement, considering where she was one week ago. If she's this far with physics—her least favorite subject—then I'm sure I've got nothing to worry about.

We took a lunch break during our study session and then got back to it until evening.

"What're you doing tomorrow?" Hoshimiya asked with her head tilted.

"Oh, sorry, but I've got to work tomorrow," I replied.

"What, really? But our tests start Monday," she said, surprised.

The manager had asked me to come in after I'd told him I wasn't concerned about my tests.

"Natsu, can I come here tomorrow in that case?" Uta asked. "I can't concentrate at home."

"Sure. I can't tutor you, though, because I'll be on the clock."

"No worries! I've got the notes you gave me, so I'll be A-OK!" she said and raised a peace sign high up into the air.

I grinned at her antics, then scoped out the others. "What about you guys?"

"I'm good. I'll study alone," Tatsuya replied somewhat stiffly.

"Me too. My parents will nag if I study outside too much," Hoshimiya said.

Nanase agreed and said, "It's the last day before the tests, so I'll also study at home."

“Then same here.” Reita said. “And honestly, I don’t have much money left.”

Something about Tatsuya’s response bothered me a bit. *Is he irritated because his studies aren’t going well? Whatever it is, I think it’ll be better to let him simmer.*

After that, we all split up and went home. Because Miori and her friend were about done as well, we went home together. And, of course, Miori and I were inevitably the last ones stuck riding on the train together.

“Of course I’m left with you. We live the furthest away, after all,” I said with a sigh.

“Grr. What do you have to be dissatisfied with? You’re going home alone with such a cute high school girl. Come on! People like the old you are green with envy at you right now. See? Doesn’t it feel good?” Miori shot back.

“What you just said ought to be considered verbal abuse to me and everyone around us.”

“Whatever. I was observing you the whole day, and it looks like you’ve got a good vibe going on there, Natsuki.”

“You think so? Hey, wait. Focus on your studies!”

Miori continued the conversation without a care for my retort. “You know your, uh, what was it called? Your ‘Seize a Rainbow-Colored Youth’ plan or whatever? The one where you’re trying to turn your boring, gray life into a fun, colorful one? You know, that *thing* you came up with for your high school debut? That’s what I’m talking about!”

I could feel my face flush. “Hearing that from someone else’s mouth is humiliating, so cut it out.”

Miori grinned deviously. “All right, let’s name it the ‘Rainbow-Colored Youth Plan’!” she said cheerfully.

You always look like you’re having the most fun when you’re toying with others. What a wicked girl! Well, the name does fit my situation perfectly. Though it pisses me off to admit it.

“Okay, anyway, you know what’s happening, right, Natsuki?”

“What? Again, what the heck are you saying?”

“I’m not trying to meddle, just trying to give you some friendly advice,” she said. My brows furrowed and Miori pointed right at my nose. “I spy a big problem with your plan. Trouble’s brewing already.”

“Figure it out on your own,” Miori said after that and went home.

Dammit! That girl. She just leaves me with some vaguely deep-sounding words and flies the coop. Something about it really does make me wonder, though. Maybe she just wanted to ruffle my feathers? No, she wouldn’t say something like that for no reason. That means there’s something going on that’ll mess up my plans, but I have no idea what.

After I got home, I flopped onto my bed, mulling over Miori’s words. I lay there for a while, just staring up at the ceiling, until my phone chimed from over by my pillow. I flipped over onto my stomach and picked it up. There was a RINE message.

As soon as I saw that the message was from Hoshimiya, I unlocked my phone in a flustered panic to read it. *Did I open it too fast? Now she can see that I read it instantly... I clicked on it so fast that it looks like I was waiting for her to text me*, I thought, regretting my hasty actions.

I started to worry that I’d creeped her out with how quickly I opened it. *No, come on. There’s no way she’d be creeped out about this...* Even though I knew that it was illogical to think that way, for some reason I just couldn’t help but fret when texting a girl.

Hoshimiya Hikari: What’re you doing?

Natsuki: I got home and now I’m just rolling around in bed

I answered honestly and instantly saw Hoshimiya’s read receipt.

Hoshimiya Hikari: Me too lol

I was about to send, “Do you need something?” but I stopped myself. *I want to know that, but it seems really cold... On the other hand, she probably does*

want something, right? If she messaged me for no reason in particular, that'd just be proof that we're close, and of course it would make me happy. While I agonized over how to respond, a second message arrived.

Hoshimiya Hikari: Can I call you right now?

I silently stared at her words. It took me a full ten seconds to digest what I was reading. *Call? Me and Hoshimiya? Why out of the blue?!*

No way! That's like, like...you know—like we're already dating!

What kind of logic is that? I argued with myself. While my brain was in chaos, Hoshimiya sent another message.

Hoshimiya Hikari: It's not a problem if you're busy right now though!

Dammit! I left her on read while I was drowning in my own confusion, and now she thinks I'm reluctant. Still, this isn't the time to be lamenting over my misplay. I hurriedly sent her a message.

Natsuki: You can!

Once I sent it, I sighed in relief. But no sooner had I relaxed than my phone started ringing from her call. I thought I'd get at least a few moments to calm down, but Hoshimiya had called as soon as she'd seen my message. I could hear my heart pounding so loud I wondered if it would pop out of my chest.

I answered and tried to speak slowly so that she wouldn't hear how nervous I was. "Hello?"

"Hi, Natsuki-kun," she replied.

"O-Oh," I stammered, "hi."

"Long time no talk, huh?" I could hear her giggling.

Hey, this isn't the time to be smiling like a doofus just because you can hear Hoshimiya's voice! But seriously, isn't her voice way too nice? It's so pleasant on the ears.

"Yeah, long time no talk," I parroted. *I am so goddamn bad at holding a conversation...*

"Did you eat dinner already?"

“Not yet. My mother’s getting home late today. I’m super hungry.” I checked the time as I said that. It was already 8 p.m.

Waiting this long for dinner was rough for a growing high schooler. I’d considered cooking something for myself, but cooking was my mom’s hobby, and I didn’t want to snatch away her precious relaxing time.

“Oh, really? I ate already,” Hoshimiya said.

“I’m jealous. What’d you eat?”

“Well,” she said playfully, “I had hamburger steak today!”

The cheerful timbre of her voice made my heart tremble. “Wow, did your mom make it?”

“Yeah! Mama rarely cooks because she’s so busy, but when she does, all the food she makes is yummy! But I think I ate too much, so now I’m worried I’ll gain weight.”

So Hoshimiya calls her mother “mama,” huh? Aw, how cute! I guess both her parents work if she said her mother’s busy? I thought she might’ve been the precious daughter of a wealthy family because of her strict curfew and how well-mannered she is.

“Hoshimiya, you’re skinny so you’ve got nothing to worry about,” I reassured her.

“I might look that way, but I’m cutting it really close right now!” I could hear a rustling noise as she said that.

Sounds like she’s rolling around on her bed.

“You think so?” I didn’t know how to approach such a delicate subject, so I gave her a vague response.

“Yes! You’re so skinny, Natsuki-kun. And you’re muscular too. How nice.”

“I’ve got nothing better to do besides lifting weights, you know.”

“Don’t say something so sad. That’s not true!”

“It’s true. I’m not in a club, so I’ve got nothing else besides my job,” I said. *It’s inevitable that self-improvement is my main focus. Even if I wanted to partake in*

my otaku hobbies, I'm seven years in the past, so it wouldn't be very interesting for me.

"Well, I guess so. What do you normally do after you get home?" she asked.

"Watch random YouTube videos, play some games, and work out."

Hoshimiya laughed. "Same here, minus the workout. Maybe I should start exercising."

"Exercising is good for you," I encouraged her. *My muscles will never betray me. They're the only thing I can believe in unconditionally.* "Oh, but I don't really want to see a brawny Hoshimiya, though."

"I wouldn't work out that much! But I am way too flimsy right now. I can only do five push-ups."

"That's it?" I teased, but I also used to be like that, so I didn't have it in me to really laugh at her.

"Okay! One, two, three..." Hoshimiya started counting loudly. I presumed that she was doing push-ups.

"You got this!" I cheered.

"Fo...ur... Hngh!" she moaned.

Um, sorry, I take it back. I'm feeling a strange tingle, so can you stop?

"Whew," she panted heavily. "I can't anymore!" I could hear her ragged breathing right in my ear.

Please stop making my heart run wild, I begged.

"I could do more before," she said. "Aw, I took a bath earlier, but now I'm all sweaty again!"

R-Really? So I'm talking to Hoshimiya fresh from the bath, huh... My mind wandered and I blanked out. My heart wouldn't be able to take it if I let this get any further out of hand, so I made the executive decision to ask her why she'd called me. *What a shame. I'd like to talk to her forever. If only my heart were more robust!*

"Oh, by the way, why the sudden call? Did something happen?" I asked

Hoshimiya became strangely quiet; she was choosing her next words carefully. After a moment of silence, she spoke up. “Um, well, nothing, really. It’s nothing big.” Her tone had dropped a pitch lower.

Well, it sure sounds like serious business. Was she so eager to chat about random stuff because she didn’t want to get to the heart of it? I thought, still lacking any idea what this could possibly be about.

She continued. “Natsuki-kun, what do you think about Tatsuya-kun lately?”

“What do you mean? What about him?” The question threw me off completely. *Is something up with Tatsuya? Why’s she asking about him?*

“Hmm. Well, he looks so down lately. I hope it’s just my imagination, but I thought maybe you would know since you’re both boys.”

“Tatsuya’s down?” I wondered aloud.

There had been many times when I’d asked myself, “Is he in a bad mood?” but I’d always waved that off as him being moody.

“I’m not sure. I haven’t really noticed,” I replied. However, a different concern sprouted within my heart. “Hoshimiya, are you into Tatsuya?”

“What do you— Huh?! N-No! I was just worried! This is one hundred percent pure concern...” The surprise in her voice alone was enough to let me know that the thought had never occurred to her one bit.

“O-Of course, sorry. That’s good, then,” I said.

“That’s good?” she questioned after a short pause.

Flustered at having let that slip during my moment of sheer relief, I tried to cover for myself. I couldn’t control my tone and ended up speaking in a shrill voice. “O-Oh, uh, I just thought that, y’know, I wouldn’t need to be careful about that if you did.”

I had no idea what garbage excuse was coming out of my mouth, but for some reason Hoshimiya replied in a higher tone than usual as well. “O-Oh, I see! Right! Ah ha ha. I got the wrong idea for a moment there.”

“A-Anyway, he seems the same as usual to me,” I said with a little cough. I desperately tried to calm my rampaging heart.

“Hmm. I guess it’s just my imagination then?” Hoshimiya’s voice sounded a bit strained, but she let the topic pass.

We chatted about the upcoming tests for a while longer until we finally hung up.

Hoshimiya’s remark about Tatsuya is weighing on my mind, but he shouldn’t have a reason to be depressed right now. Well, he’s suffering because of the tests, so maybe that’s why she thought he looked more dejected than normal.

It was almost nine when I checked the time. I went to the living room and saw my portion of dinner wrapped up on the table. In front of my meal was a note that said, “I heard you talking to a girl. Good luck ≡” written by my mom. *Ugh, mom, mind your own business...*

I spent the next day working and casually chatting with Uta when time allowed. In a flash, the three-day exam period arrived.

We didn’t gather for a study group on the test days. No matter how seriously we tried to study, we likely would’ve ended up chatting every now and then. Also, Tatsuya immediately booked it after the tests. He said, “I want to concentrate,” but the way he ran off left a lot of room for concern.

My conversations with Hoshimiya and Miori flashed through my mind. *Should I do something? But I don’t know why Tatsuya’s acting so weird. I shouldn’t do anything rash if I don’t know what’s up, I reasoned. Plus, it is that time of year. Maybe he really does want to concentrate on his studies.*

The three days went by in the blink of an eye as I wondered what was going on with Tatsuya. The tests themselves had been a cinch for me, and I’d finished them easily. So easily, in fact, that I was actually worried—yes, *worried*—that I’d accidentally scored a hundred percent on all of them. I hadn’t meant to study particularly hard for the exams, but teaching Uta was a surprisingly great way for me to review.

“We’re free!” Uta cheered after we handed in our answer sheets for the last test of the week, math. She stretched her arms high into the air.

As her tutor, I was more curious about her grades than my own, so I had to

ask her how she felt about the exams. “So, how’d it go?”

“I think it went pretty good thanks to you, Natsu!” she replied.

Really? I thought, relieved by her confidence. *It looks like she avoided failing, at the very least.*

“Forget that. I’m pooped! I don’t want to study for a while,” she said.

As the main overseer of her studies, I couldn’t let that pass. “Hey now! Didn’t you say you’d pay attention in class properly?” I scolded her.

Hoshimiya joined in with a laugh. “I understand how you feel, though. I want at least a week off.”

“You won’t be able to keep up with class if you take a week off.” Yuino dropped the truth upon them ruthlessly.

“Yuino-chan! Now’s not the time for a sound argument!” Hoshimiya replied.

Now that school was over for the day, the usual group was all assembled. Uta, Reita, and I sat in the same column of desks, so the other three naturally gathered around us.

Tatsuya was walking towards us and looking pretty grim, so I asked, “Hey, Tatsuya, how was it?”

“Hmm.” He mulled over the test. “I think I avoided failing.” His reluctant response showed how clearly iffy he felt about it.

I can see why he looks so worn out. He’s not pessimistic, but there’s plenty for him to worry about since failing means less basketball practice. And we all know basketball is his everything.

“Well, it’s all over now, so no point in worrying about it. Let’s all take it easy!” Uta said cheerfully.

Tatsuya looked at her ruefully. “I envy your optimism.”

“Hey! I was trying to cheer you up!”

“Yeah, true. Thanks,” Tatsuya said. His eyes softened in a rare honest show of appreciation. “But man, clubs don’t restart until tomorrow, so I’ve got nothing to do.”

“Who cares if we start today? I want to play basketball!” Uta exclaimed.

“I’ve heard that other schools start practice the day their tests are over. But we don’t do that here anymore because a lot of our students tend to stay up all night studying. Some of them ended up collapsing when they went to practice after their tests.” Reita fed us all a fun fact.

I smirked. “Sounds like they’re reaping what they sowed.”

“Honestly, I’m glad we don’t have practice today,” Reita admitted. “I’d like at least half a day to refresh myself after all the hard studying. I do want to get back into club activities but I’m tired.”

“All righty! Then let’s all go to karaoke!” Uta proclaimed, her voice overflowing with energy. As she spoke, she smiled brightly and pointed up high into the air for some unknown reason. It seemed like after the test season, she was renewed and livelier than ever.

“Good idea. I’m down,” I agreed. I had gotten into karaoke back in college, so I often went by myself, but I’d never gone with friends before. I was feeling excited, just a bit. *I really want to go to karaoke with everyone.*

“Then I’ll come along too.” Reita nodded and looked over at Hoshimiya and Nanase.

“Okay! I’m in!” Hoshimiya agreed happily.

Nanase gave her a look. “Are you sure? Hikari, aren’t you tone-deaf?”

“Shut up! The tone-deaf have the right to sing too! No one can stop me from spending time on the things I like!”

“Is that why you’re always spending time with me, Hikarin?” Uta asked innocently.

“I’m not talking about you, Uta-chan! Oh, but I do like you too. Aaah, quit confusing me!” Hoshimiya cried out.

I laughed. Even if it was Uta we were talking about, I knew she was just playing dumb. “I see; so Hoshimiya has no sense for music either.”

“Hey! Don’t say ‘either,’ okay? It hurts my feelings!” Hoshimiya puffed up her cheeks in a pout.

Yep, very cute, I thought.

The five of us who'd confirmed so far turned to Tatsuya for his answer. Uta ran up closer to him, and he looked down to meet her gaze.

"Tatsu, you're coming too, right? It'll be more fun to distract yourself with some singing than to mope around alone all day!" she said.

"Yeah, I guess that's true." Tatsuya grinned and agreed to come.

He really does look listless, but it's not anything extraordinarily strange. His reason for acting this way is obvious too. I'm sure it'll pass with time, so I'll just let it be.

It really depends on the person, but when I'm down, I want everyone to leave me alone. It's nice to know that they're worried about me, but it's honestly just annoying if they pry. I should do unto others what I want done to me, after all. Well, not that I ever had any friends who'd poke their noses into my problems. Ha ha...

And so, we went to the karaoke joint in front of the station to sing our hearts out. We were all more excited than usual, perhaps because tests had just ended.

Even Nanase looked enthusiastic. Apparently, she even knew the dances for popular idol songs.

"Wh-Whoa." I marveled at her performance. "Wow. Bravo!" Predictably, Nanase's turn in the limelight had made her embarrassed. *I see that she's a fan of idols. How unexpected... Except, not really. I had a feeling she was.*

"Whoo! That's my Yuino-chan!" Hoshimiya stood up confidently. "I'm up next!"

When she's holding a mic, Hoshimiya looks like a real idol. She's definitely pretty enough for it, and I can practically see an aura of sparkles around her. Okay, that's just me hallucinating.

"~♪"

I grinned at the indescribable atrocities...I mean, notes...that Hoshimiya was

belching out with that cute voice of hers. *Ah well, she looks like she's having fun so it's fine. It's not like we're having a singing contest here.* Despite feeling that way, I did want her to think I was good at singing. *I want Hoshimiya to see my cool side.*

"Okay, I'm next," Reita said and started his song.

Everyone had taken turns inputting popular songs and then singing at the top of their lungs. Depending on the song, sometimes two people would sing a duet, but generally the person who put the song in would take their turn solo.

I'd passed up my initial turn to choose a song, pretending to be indecisive so that I could observe everyone else first.

I see. So these are the rules of group karaoke. There wasn't any discussion, and yet everyone knew what to do. I'm sure this is all common sense for them.

If I had to rank everyone in terms of singing skill, it'd be Uta, Nanase, Reita, Tatsuya, and then Hoshimiya. They're all pretty good—besides Hoshimiya—but it's nothing mind-blowing. If we had the points system on, they'd probably score between eighty and ninety points. I was pointlessly familiar with how the scoring system worked because that's all I'd had to look at when I was karaokeing alone.

Up until now, I'd been secretly freaking out, fearing that popular kids were all exceptionally good at singing—so good that they could be pros. But of course reality didn't live up to my misconceptions. I would be able to sing without making a fool of myself.

More importantly, I need to pick a song. One part of the problem is that I don't really listen to popular songs, but another part is that I'm from seven years in the future. All of the songs I can think of are outdated to me.

Recently, I'd been listening to nothing apart from the songs of this one rock band I liked. They were definitely on the obscure side, but Uta had also sung a rock song that wasn't particularly famous either. *This'll probably be fine,* I thought hesitantly as I stared at the DENMOKU's touch screen. A DENMOKU, for my fellow introverts, is a portable touch screen device used in karaoke places to easily search and queue up songs.

Besides, I don't think they're the type to be blatantly disappointed just because a song they don't know comes on. Still, it's my first song so I want to proceed with caution... Thoughts swirled through my head and before long my turn was almost here.

Tatsuya had just finished his song, so I entered one in a panic.

"Ah ha ha! Natsu, you're so slow!" Uta cackled.

"Yeeeah, I wasn't sure what to sing, is all..." I replied awkwardly then stood up, growing oddly cognizant of the fact that I was the last person in the first rotation of songs.

Uta blinked when she saw the song title appear on-screen. "Huh? You listen to Alexandros?! We've got the same taste, Natsu!"

Thought so! I figured Uta and I shared the same taste in music. Ugh, I can feel everyone staring at me now that I'm standing up.

"I like this song too! Can I sing it with you?" Uta asked as she picked up the second mic.

I smiled dryly. *Her actions show she doesn't think I'll say no at all.* "Yeah, of course. I get nervous singing alone."

I actually want you to sing with me. Having the undivided attention of five people is too hard for a classroom gloom like me. I'm super nervous too! I've never sung in front of other people before. I'm actually grateful that you'll be diverting part of the attention away from me.

"Ah ha ha! Is this your first time karaokeing?!" Uta asked.

Actually, I might be what you call a karaoke expert, but it's true that this is my first time karaokeing with other people.

"Wait, are you bad at singing?" Uta asked me with a grin.

"Who knows?" I answered dubiously.

Really, who does? If I go by the karaoke scoring system, then I don't think I'm bad. But I see people post online all the time that the scoring system has no correlation to how good a singer you are, I thought as the song started playing. My mind blanked due to nerves, and I sang with all my soul.

I took a deep breath after we'd finished our song. The room had become eerily quiet.

Uh, did I do something wrong? I don't know why, but it feels like the air's chilled over. Also, Uta stopped singing midway through and sat down. Why'd she do that?! I was about to bow my head and apologize for whatever I did, but I was interrupted by Uta.

"W-Wow! Natsu, you're sooo good!"

"Huh?" I looked at her, confused.

"I sat down because I thought I was ruining your groove!"

"Y-You weren't. I wanted you to keep going! I was nervous!"

"Are you being sarcastic? That good and you were still nervous?" Reita asked with a dry smile.

"Wow, you were really great! I spaced out because I was so immersed in the afterglow," Hoshimiya said with a satisfied smile.

"I could stan you," our resident idol fan, Nanase, murmured ominously.

Does she like male idols too? At any rate, I already stan you, so please don't stan me! I'd rather it not be a mutual thing.

"Dude, you're a man but you can hit all those high notes?" Tatsuya stared at me with genuine surprise.

There was a period in my life when I single-mindedly practiced my falsetto and mixed voice techniques. I recalled the days when I used to go to karaoke boxes alone for practice. Nobody had been around to watch or listen to me, but either way I spent many days recording myself singing, listening to it, and then improving.

"Oh, uh, well, this isn't much," I said. I was at a loss as to how to reply, but I knew that definitely wasn't it.

Well then. It seems like the air didn't freeze over because I sucked. I had a feeling I couldn't possibly be that bad, but for a moment there everyone stared

at me like they'd turned into blocks of ice. It made me wonder if I actually had a terrible sense of pitch compared to a normal human. Guys, don't make me panic so much!

Anyway, I guess they're surprised because I was unexpectedly good? That's definitely better, I thought as I rubbed my chest to calm myself. I'm so nervous I got the jitters.

"Hey, Natsu! I want to hear you sing more! Can you do this one?!" Uta scooted over to show me the song she'd pulled up on the DENMOKU.

It was a popular song from a band I liked. "Yeah, nice pick. Let's rock, Uta!" I paused when I realized what I had just said. "Oh man, that sounds cringeworthy, doesn't it?"

"Maybe! Anyway, you're okay with that? I'm not that good. Won't I get in your way?"

"Not at all. Isn't it more fun if we all sing together? It's way more hype."



That was my honest opinion. *Singing is way more fun with others than it is solo. But maybe it's just a breath of fresh air for me because it's my first time karaokeing with other people.*

"Okay, then... Do you know this song? Or this one?" Uta asked.

She'd pulled up a couple of tracks from a relatively obscure rock band. I listened to them quite often, but it was likely that Hoshimiya and the others had never heard of them before.

"We really do have the same taste in music, Uta," I commented.

"I know, right?! Come to think of it, we never talk about music, huh? I don't have a lot of friends that I can discuss rock music with, so I'm pumped! Yaaay!" Uta cheered and then thumped me on the shoulder, her energy maxed out.

You smell kinda nice, and now I'm getting all self-conscious about touching a girl, so cool your jets, please! Oh man, I think like this every time someone touches me... In spite of that one grievance, I was on the same wavelength as Uta. *It's nice to have a friend to talk to about the music you like.*

"A-All right! Let's sing 'em all!" I cheered, starting to feel the beat, and smiled at Uta.

After a second, she said, "Yeah!" and beamed back.

Every time it was Uta's or my turn, we'd get hyped up and sing a duet together. The others probably didn't recognize the songs, but I appreciated that they acted as excited as we were. Their reactions had also gradually given me more confidence in my singing skills. Instead of giving me empty compliments, everyone truly thought I was a skilled singer.

To be fair, I did practice a ton... I thought. In the past, I had even scored up to ninety-nine points. *Huh, looks like the point system is surprisingly trustworthy. I also feel like Uta and I have gotten closer. Getting to know your friends is truly a wonderful thing!*

I'm having so much fun; this is a blast! Now I'm living the rainbow-colored

youth I've always yearned for. I have five friends I adore, and one of them is even my crush. They hang out with me, laugh with me, and they like me too.

Our days together felt like the sweetest dream. Everything was exactly as I'd hoped for—longed for—back when I made my wish to god. *I want to redo my drab, gray youth and overwrite those memories with a rainbow of colors.*

Everything is going swimmingly. Is this what smooth sailing feels like?

Of course, I'm not perfect, but I think I'm doing pretty well if I do say so myself. I spruced up my looks, ran to lose weight, built up muscle lifting weights, practiced smiling, learned the fashion of this decade, went through plenty of trial and error to hold natural conversations with my friends, and even studied enough that I could teach others. That's how I clawed my way here.

I worked hard, so very hard, to get where I am now. It's thanks to all that blood, sweat, and tears that I can finally feel this happy. This boy, formerly trapped in his gray world, was now confident that his Rainbow-Colored Youth Plan was progressing perfectly!

Just then, my reflections were interrupted.

“Sorry, guys. I'm gonna head home first.”

Those abrupt words echoed through the room, right after Uta and I finished another duet. The brisk voice stabbed through the short-lived silence between songs, cutting through the happy atmosphere like a sharp knife. The voice had come from none other than Tatsuya.

The air froze over once again.

What's up with him? I looked at Tatsuya, but he forced a smile.

After a moment, he said, “Have fun, guys,” and left the karaoke room without waiting for a reply. We didn't even have time to stop him.

Silence fell over the room, and we all looked at each other. It was Hoshimiya's turn, but the atmosphere wasn't very welcoming to another song, and the mic remained on the table. Regardless, the song played on without a singer, and an

ill-suited, cheerful melody filled the void.

“I wonder what’s wrong with Tatsu,” Uta murmured worriedly.

Hoshimiya said with a troubled frown, “Yeah, this isn’t like him... I thought he’d been looking somber lately.”

I’d been thinking the same thing. Looks like everyone’s been worried about him. Originally, I assumed it was because of the tests, but is that really it? Would someone so crude and apathetic to grades like Tatsuya get that down because he’s worried about failing a test? But I can’t think of anything else that’d make him feel bad. Guess my only choice is to ask him directly!

“I’m gonna go check up on him,” I said and stood up. *Tatsuya’s my friend. And I’m determined to be a friend to him. I want to help out if he’s brooding over something.*

“Wait a sec, Natsuki.” Reita grabbed my shoulder, preventing me from leaving the room. He regarded me grimly.

“Reita?” I looked back at him, confused.

He seemed to be considering something for a moment and then finally murmured, “No, sorry. Maybe this is the fastest way.”

That was a very enigmatic statement. Ah well, doesn’t look like he wants to stop me anymore. I’d better hurry! I won’t be able to catch up if Tatsuya rides off on his bike.

“Tatsuya!” I called out, having chased him to the bike parking area.

He turned around slowly when he heard my voice. His face was obscured by the setting sun behind him. The shadows around us only grew longer, until he said, “Natsuki. What’s up?”

“Don’t ask me that! I was worried because you were acting stra—”

“I’m fine. Seriously, you don’t need to worry about it,” Tatsuya said, cutting me off.

His words were like usual, but his tone was oddly flat, so I couldn’t read his

emotions. I asked, “Are you upset?”

He hesitated before answering, “Not particularly. What? Is there something I should be mad about?”

I thought hard. “Not that I know of. But I’m asking because you look angry.”

I felt the air electrify. The moment seemed tense, like things would go south extremely fast if I said even one wrong word.

An indifferent tone, an unreadable expression—even I could tell Tatsuya was trying to stifle his emotions because he could barely contain the fury behind his eyes.

“Natsuki. Sorry, man, but leave me alone today.”

I had a bad feeling. I’d seen Tatsuya get like this once before—in that same unforgettable moment when I’d realized my failings and my youth had gone downhill.

“Hey, Natsuki? Sorry, man, but I can’t stick up for you anymore. Besides, you piss me off.”

He was acting exactly the same as that time. That was why I was scared to let him leave. I knew the rational course of action would be to back off, but I couldn’t help but step closer. “Tatsuya. If there’s something bothering you, then I—”

“Shut up! I told you to leave me alone!” he yelled.

From this close, I could finally see his shaded expression clearly. Tatsuya was staring daggers at me. He looked like he hated me.

“Don’t you ever feel so pathetic that you just want to be alone?!”

His question confused me; I wasn’t sure what he was getting at. So I stopped walking towards him.

Tatsuya? Pathetic? That’s how he thinks of himself? That strong, confident jock who always laughs boisterously? That image was so different from my own conception of Tatsuya that I couldn’t believe it, even coming from the man himself. But he doesn’t look like he’s lying. And this isn’t the time to be joking around.

Tatsuya snorted when he saw my confusedly furrowed brows. "I guess someone perfect like you would never get it..."

I need to say something, I thought, but I was at a loss for words, and only a dumb, "Huh?" slipped out of my mouth.

There's no way he's talking about me, right? There's nothing perfect about me at all. The only perfect person in our group is Reita, not me. But Reita's not here. Does that mean we're talking about Reita now?

Still unable to make heads or tails of what Tatsuya was saying, I asked tentatively, "Are you talking about Reita?"

"Dude." Tatsuya's eyes narrowed. "Are you asking that for real?"

"What do you mean?" I responded. *I'm serious! I don't have a clue what you're going on about.*

Understanding that I was completely bewildered, Tatsuya turned away from me. "I'm not talking about Reita. That guy's good at most things, but I wouldn't call him perfect. I'd know, since we're childhood friends. I'm real familiar with his weak points," he said as he unlocked his bike.

He's not talking about Reita? "Uh, then you're talking about me? You seriously think I'm perfect?"

"You don't think so, Natsuki? That's what it looks like to me, though."

I almost scoffed and said, "That's crazy talk!" But before I did, Tatsuya turned to look at me, and I could see in his eyes that he was being serious.

Tatsuya let out a big sigh and patted me on the shoulder. "Sorry, Natsuki. Don't sweat it. You didn't do anything." With that, he hopped on his bike and rode away.

I watched his back disappear into the distance. I stood there motionless for I don't know how long until I heard footsteps behind me.

"Sorry, Natsuki. I had a feeling this might happen."

Still dazed, I turned around to see Reita regarding me solemnly. "You thought this might happen? Why the heck? What do you mean by that?"

I was still absolutely lost. All I knew was that I'd made a mistake—I was now in the same situation as my first go-round.

"Tatsuya's jealous of you," Reita stated plainly.

"Huh?" I stared at him. Borrowing a page from Tatsuya's book, now Reita was spouting incomprehensible statements. *This'd make sense if everyone else jumped out with a giant sign that said "PRANKED" on it. Jealousy is my thing. It's not something they should feel for me,* I thought. Aloud, I said, "Jealous? Of me? What's there to be jealous of?"

"Your remarkable lack of confidence is probably why you're so unaware of how people feel about you. It really doesn't match up with your capabilities... I'm kinda concerned about how that might've come into being," Reita said.

He's got a point. I don't know how to read others' perceptions of me.

Part of that's because of my past failures. I became arrogant, got in over my head, and annoyed everyone—I didn't even notice when people started hating me. My overconfidence was extremely unfounded.

But that's weird. What Reita's saying now is the complete opposite of that.

"No confidence...?" I questioned. "I think I've got tons of confidence. There's no one around more confident than me."

That's why I blundered, after all. There's no doubt about that.

"I see." Reita looked at me as if he were peering into my soul. "I think I understand what's going on inside your head better."

Sure, I lost all my confidence, hope, expectations, and everything else after I failed to live a happy adolescence last time, but I've been regaining that lost confidence gradually during this redo. I used my past experience as an example, and I've been trying to carefully control my ego so it doesn't get out of hand.

Is Reita saying that's a mistake?

"Don't get the wrong idea; I'm not criticizing you. If anything, you've done nothing wrong." Reita hesitated. "That's precisely why. You haven't done a single thing wrong."

Then what do I do? My demeanor wasn't flawless, but I did my utmost to

make the best possible decisions. No! Was that my mistake?

“I think the trouble started with basketball. Tatsuya’s identity is basketball itself, but you beat him at it. Of course, that’s all because you were the better player. You should be proud of it. You didn’t do anything wrong at all.” Reita objectively narrated these past events. He observed me with those eyes that sometimes had a habit of seeing too much.

He continued on. “After that, it was one surprise after another. The cooking skills you displayed at your part-time job, your ability to teach people, your singing today—everything about you is perfect. And finally, the icing on the cake: the way Uta’s eyes twinkled at you.”

“Wha—” I said haltingly. “What’s this got to do with Uta?”

“That’s easy. Tatsuya loves Uta,” Reita answered simply, as if it were obvious to anyone. “I’ve known all along, but I’m sure Hoshimiya-san and Nanase-san have caught on by now.” He laughed dryly. “Tatsuya’s easy to understand, after all.”

I had never realized it because they were always bickering. “He said he didn’t like anyone when I asked him the other day, though...”

“Well, I’m not surprised he said that. Tatsuya always acts tough, especially in front of you.”

I was dumbfounded. *Unbelievable! But...if I take my own preconceptions out of the picture and consider what Reita’s saying objectively, then it definitely checks out with what Tatsuya said.*

“Why? Why...” I struggled to verbalize my thoughts, and all that came out was a garbled mess. “For me— To me... I look up to Tatsuya. I... I wanted to be like him. Someone bright and fun to be around. Like him. I wanted to be friends with him. I thought if I did, every day would be fun. That’s why I... So why? Why’s he jealous of someone like me?”

Reita blinked in surprise. “I see. So that’s how you feel. Calm down for now. I’m sure it’ll be resolved with time.” He patted me on the shoulder and shot me a reassuring smile. “Tatsuya’s at fault here. You didn’t do anything wrong. Got it? You’ve done nothing wrong.”

But I probably did do something wrong.

In the past, I hadn't understood others' feelings. And even now that one fact remained unchanged.

Chapter 4: If You've Got My Back

Tatsuya stopped talking to me the next day. Or rather, Tatsuya became a loner. He didn't hang out with us and stuck to himself.

When our eyes met that morning, he just looked away. He hadn't even said hello, instead leaving my hand hanging pointlessly in the air. Tatsuya's attitude was reminiscent of my first time through high school.

He would respond to Uta and Hoshimiya if they addressed him, but he made no effort to continue the conversation. I anguished over whether I should do something but chose to believe in Reita's words. Time would solve the issue.

"I wonder what happened," the three girls said. They may not have known what occurred between Tatsuya and me, but anyone could see that the atmosphere was dark and sullen.

The girls looked curious and concerned. However, Reita didn't explain the situation, so I followed suit and stayed silent. I didn't want to say anything that might get Tatsuya's crush involved.

"Oh. The next class is starting," I remarked.

Only one person was missing from our group, but that was more than enough to darken the day. I'd quickly realized that Uta was not the only mood maker in our group; Tatsuya also played a large part in livening things up.

The air is heavy. This sucks! It's not fun at all. We could all feel the strain in the air no matter how everyone tried to play it off.

I wouldn't say that this is the high school life I wished for, even if someone put a gun to my head.

Tatsuya ate lunch alone and ran off to practice as soon as the after-school bell rang.

The rest of us also went our separate ways. Hoshimiya and Nanase stuck

together as usual, and Uta hung around for a bit to talk to her other class friends. Reita and I left to go observe Tatsuya.

Things continued like that for the rest of the week, until the weekend was nearly here. The days were boring and listless. I could feel the vibrant world around me fading away. I'd returned to my familiar scenery; those gray-colored days were calling me back.

"You're amazing, Natsu!" Uta cried out with a smile. We were looking up at the poster in the hallway where our midterm exam rankings had been put up. It felt like it'd been a long time since she'd smiled like that. However, the usual bounce in her voice was missing, and it sounded like she was forcing herself.

"Oh, thanks," I said. I was ranked first in the grade, with an overwhelming lead over second place.

Nanase was in third, Reita in eleventh, and Hoshimiya had barely made it into the top scorers listing at forty-ninth place. When I took another look, I saw that Miori had landed herself eighth place. Uta's and Tatsuya's names were, as expected, not listed.

"How'd you do, Uta?" I asked.

"Eh heh heh. Well, I'm rank number one hundred, all thanks to you!" Uta puffed up pridefully. Our grade had 240 students, so she'd outperformed over half of them.

That's a huge accomplishment compared to the disastrous shape she used to be in, I thought. She did better than I did in my first time around, at the very least.

"Hey, that guy over there..."

"Eh? His face is totally my type..."

"He's smart too..."

I could feel the other students' eyes on me as I stood in the hallway. I was attracting a lot of attention, probably because of my grades.

Hopefully I wasn't being conceited, but it felt like their gazes harbored either envy or affection. There were an especially large number of girls staring at me.

To me, it was only obvious I'd score this high since it was my second attempt at high school; however, those around me didn't know that I'd traveled back in time, so of course it wasn't a given for them. I hadn't understood that until now.

A perfect person, huh? I just can't see that title fitting me, I thought. And anyway, if I really were perfect, I wouldn't have made such a huge mistake. Things wouldn't have turned out like this, and I wouldn't be regretting so much. I never would've wished to redo my youth in the first place.

"Hey, Natsu? Let's hang out on Saturday with everyone. I'm free in the afternoon," Uta finally said as she tugged on my sleeve. Her words were alluring.

But by now, I had figured it out already. *Uta probably like likes me. That's the main reason why Tatsuya is so jealous of me. But I don't have any control over that. At the same time, it's an emotional thing, so it's not like Tatsuya can control how he feels either. That must be why he's staying away from me.*

If so, I reasoned, that's Tatsuya's problem, not mine. I shouldn't have to worry about it.

If we all hung out over the weekend, we'd get in the mood to let loose and have fun. Then when we went to school on Monday, the strained atmosphere would gradually improve. Everything would be solved if we all just enjoyed each other's company once more—even if Tatsuya wasn't there.

Humans are good at adapting when the environment changes, after all. What Uta was suggesting was the first step to that future.

I hesitated and then said, "Sorry, Uta. I want to be alone this weekend." I shook my head no, even though I knew that would've been the easiest solution.

I'll never accept that kind of future. Sure, if I walk that path, I might seize a happier youth than I did in the past, blunders aside. But this mistake is fatal. Letting that happen would mean my plan had failed. I can't allow it!

After all, I returned to this time so I could become friends with Tatsuya.

I walked home alone that day. Even though it was normally the day Hoshimiya also went home alone, I didn't invite her to walk with me.

I didn't feel like talking to anyone.

The train swayed and rattled as it carried me all the way home, a long commute as always. It was raining by the time I got off at the station nearest my home.

The light drizzle gradually turned into a heavy downpour. *The weather report didn't say it'd rain this morning*, I thought. I didn't have an umbrella with me. Without much of an option, I ran all the way home in that heavy rain. It didn't take long before I was drenched head to toe.

My home was a five-minute walk from the station. I trudged onwards in my soaked clothes; they were just as dampened as my mood right now.

"Redoing my youth, huh?" I mumbled aloud. *What a joke! I was careful because of my last screwup, but I can't believe I botched it this time because I was too perfect. The only thing that awaits a gray boy like me is an equally gray world.*

I stopped walking and looked up at the dark sky. The rain pounded down on me.

"What am I supposed to do?" I cried out. But there was no one to give me the answer. I felt like I would only hit a dead end no matter what path I tried to take now.

"If it was going to turn out like this..." I said aloud and then dropped my voice down to a whisper. "Then it would've been better if I hadn't gotten a second chance."

Or I should've just stayed on the same path and walked the gray road just like before. There's a place where everyone belongs, after all, and that's all that's within my reach.

"What's wrong, Sir First-Place Prodigy?" a voice called from behind me, and the rain suddenly stopped. No, it hadn't stopped. It had only stopped beating down upon me. I looked up to see an umbrella spread out above me. "If something happened, then your childhood friend will lend you her ear out of

the kindness of her heart.”

I looked behind me and saw Miori standing there. *How blind to my surroundings was I for her to creep up so close without me realizing, heavy rain or not?* I scorned myself.

Miori was close enough that our shoulders were touching, and we were sharing an umbrella together.

“Cut it out. I’m already soaked to the bone; there’s no point in using an umbrella now.”

“Ah ha ha, true that. Then I’ll stop. You’re so logical even when you’re down in the dumps.” Miori stepped away from me without hesitation and the hard rain poured over me once more.

“Oh, do you want me to carry your bag at least? Your books are going to be ruined if you let it get any wetter. I’m kind, after all!” Miori said and snatched my bag away without waiting for my response.

You can’t call it asking for permission if you don’t even give me time to say no, I thought.

“And so? What happened?” Miori asked with a smile as she twirled the umbrella in her hands.

The way she barged into my heart without a lick of consideration for my feelings irritated me. “It’s got nothing to do with you.”

“It’s a big deal for me. ’Cause I’m a fellow conspirator for your Rainbow-Colored Youth Plan, right?”

Oh yeah, we did agree on that. I’d help Miori get close to Reita in return for her assistance with my plan. And on that day when we named the plan officially, Miori had warned me, “I spy a big problem with your plan. Trouble’s brewing already.”

The train had arrived at our station right after she’d said that, and then her parents came to pick her up. But I could’ve called her or texted her via RINE had I really wanted to know.

Instead, I’d been overly optimistic and ignored her words. In fact, I’d straight

up forgotten them until now. *There's no way there're any problems*, I had thought.

"Then our partnership is over now," I said flatly.

My bad for not listening to your warning, but it's too late for that. This plan's already crashed and burned.

I shed my uniform and took a shower as soon as I got home. After toweling off, I changed into comfortable loungewear and returned to my room.

"Sup! Welcome back." Miori was lying down on my bed waving at me.

"Hey! I told you to go home," I grumbled.

"Now, now, don't say that!" She looked around the room, still reclined on my bed. "But man, your room hasn't changed at all."

Stop making yourself cozy in someone else's home! Also, aren't you forgetting I'm a guy? Stop looking so defenseless. I sighed. "It hasn't? Have you been here before?"

"Yeah, when we were kindergarteners. Wait, you don't remember? That's coold!"

"That's ancient history. Who remembers things from kindergarten?" I countered. *Seriously! Well, mentally speaking, I'm a fourth-year in college, so maybe that's why? Nah, even when I was mentally a high schooler, I still don't think I remembered much from that far back in the day.* "Anyway, no way my room's the same now as it was in kindergarten."

"Well, you've certainly got more books. And there's more otaku stuff too," she commented.

I'd gotten into light novels in my first year of middle school, so I'd ended up buying a lot of them. Miori spied a slightly lewd cover by my bed and giggled.

"Wowee! You really are a guy," she scoffed.

"Oh, shut it. And stop looking around." I walked over to Miori and confiscated the book from her. In doing so, I ended up standing over her, which led her to

playfully thrash her feet and scream with glee, “Aaah! I’m being attacked!”

“Hey, do you want me to attack you for real?!”

“As if you’d have the guts to do that! Don’t push yourself there, Mr. Virgin.” Miori poked my nose and then got off my bed.

Yes, I’m a virgin! You got a problem with that? Hey, wait, isn’t Miori a virgin too? I thought, but then the shock hit me. Huh! Is she really? No, she can’t be— Do high schoolers move that fast these days? I’m curious, but I don’t want to know the truth, so I’ll just let the topic slide.

Miori walked over to the door and used her phone to take a picture of my room. “Hmm. The layout’s pretty much the same, minus the extra shelf. Probably.”

“Okay, that’s true...” I trailed off. “Hey, why’re you taking a picture? You’d better not post that on Minsta!”

It’ll be bad news if Uta finds out that I’m with Miori right after telling her I wanted to be alone. They’re in the same club, so they must be Minsta friends.

“I’m not going to post it; I don’t want Reita-kun to get the wrong idea. This is just a memento of the good old days.”

“What’s that even mean?” I cocked my head, puzzled, and then a realization came to me. *Wait a minute! Miori’s on the basketball team with Uta. Uta went to club as usual today, so they must have practice today. Why’d I run into Miori on my way home?*

“Hey, don’t you have practice today?” I asked her.

“Hmm? I skipped it,” she replied nonchalantly.

“Huh?”

“I’m not as serious as Uta is about basketball, after all,” she said with her usual playful lilt.

“Why’d you skip out?”

“Cause I’m tired and, even though I do enjoy it, I thought it would be annoying. Can’t I slack off once in a while?”

“But you didn’t have practice for over a week,” I pointed out.

“That’s different. I had to study the whole time. I worked really hard and even stayed up all night studying, but I only ranked eighth. I got a real taste of how this high school is in a different league. That’s why I was really surprised to see you in first place. What brought on the sudden change?”

I hesitated before saying, “Well, y’know, I worked hard. My way.”

“For your high school debut—I mean, your Rainbow-Colored Youth Plan?” Miori asked.

I nodded, at which she replied, “I see, makes sense,” and sat back down on my bed. “But that’s only around twenty percent of the reason why.”

For a moment, I wondered what she meant, but I eventually figured out that she’d returned to the topic of skipping practice. *The conversation always jumps around whenever I talk to Miori. Everything just comes and goes. She really does whatever she pleases.*

“Then what about the remaining eighty percent?” I asked.

“Uta’s been acting strange lately. I figured something was up, so I asked her, but no dice. Uta didn’t know what was wrong either, so I looked for you.” Miori pointed at me with finger guns and pretended to shoot me. “Bang!”

“Ah, I see. So that’s why you’re being so persistent,” I said. *It’s normal to want to do something if your friend’s looking down. This is all my fault. I’d better tell her the details,* I thought.

“Persistent? Rude. Aren’t I your fellow conspirator?”

For a moment, I didn’t say anything. “I told you. The plan’s ruined already.”

“Yeah, I get that you think that. But let’s talk first,” Miori encouraged me gently.

Fine, I’ll talk, I thought. But my mouth went dry and refused to open. Seeing me clam up, Miori patted my head.

“Quit it. I’m not a kid,” I said, breaking the silence.

“But isn’t this how I used to console you when we were little?” she asked.

A recollection of the past flashed through my mind. *Oh yeah, that was the case.* So I grumbled, “Yeah, well, that’s the past. I don’t think we’re that close anymore now.”

We’d been close friends from kindergarten all the way through elementary school. I was the one who’d avoided Miori in middle school and put that distance between us. I was jealous of how sociable she was, how she was surrounded by friends, and how she was always the center of attention. It was selfish of me.

Miori had realized what I was doing and given up on reaching out to me. And that’s how I’d become solitary.

“You’re such a small man. Does what happened in middle school still bug you?” Miori glared at me, but I looked away. I’d be lying if I said it didn’t.

“I’m sorry that I wasn’t able to help you.” She apologized earnestly, catching me completely off guard.

“What for?” I asked. “I’m the one who drifted away. There’s no reason for you to apologize!”

That’s exactly why I was trying to change myself; I didn’t want to be jealous of Miori. I wanted us to be equals and stand on the same stage. That’s why I’d ended up barreling into a high school debut the first time around—all to grasp those vibrant school days I’d witnessed. It was my first opportunity to change course.

“I know, right? I think so too,” she said. “In fact, I didn’t do anything wrong. Seriously, give me a break! I’m acting like this now, but I was really hurt back then, you know? Think about it from my perspective: my longtime childhood friend suddenly started hating me, all because he was jealous of me. Don’t you think that’s unreasonable?”

I fell silent, not even daring to grumble. *Then don’t apologize first,* I thought, but I knew that Miori had hit the nail on the head. “How’d you know? That I was jealous of you, I mean.”

“‘Cause you set your heart on a high school debut. I thought you hated cheerful, popular kids, so I was trying to be considerate about it, y’know?” She

added, “Oh, hey, my guess was right!”

“That was a guess? You tricked me!”

Miori regarded me bitterly. Then she changed to sitting cross-legged on my bed and adopted a cheerful smile.

Come to think of it, that story kinda sounds like what’s happening between Tatsuya and me right now... I wonder if he feels the same way I did?

“Judging by the look on your face, you did something, didn’t you?” she asked.

Bull’s-eye! Welp, I can’t counter her accusation.

“Like I said, I get that you don’t want to spill the beans. Maybe it’s an embarrassing mistake. But I’ve known you for a long time. I know what you were like before your high school debut. I know your uncool sides, pathetic sides—I even know you’re bad at holding a conversation. I know it all! Of course I’d also know your plan wouldn’t be smooth sailing,” Miori said as she swiped through photos of my crummy past self on her phone.

“So you don’t need to act tough in front of me,” she explained. “You don’t need to hide your true self.”

Sweat poured out of my eyes for some odd reason. I refused to admit that they were tears, so I blamed it on the heavy rain.

I could clearly hear the pitter-patter of rain as I vented my feelings in a ramble. After I’d finished telling the story, a heavy silence descended on the room for a moment. *Miori’s quick on her feet, but even this must be too big a problem for her to tackle. I mean, look at how much I’ve been agonizing over it!*

After a while, Miori broke the silence and murmured, “I see. So that’s what happened.” She stood up without warning. “Man, you’re the biggest idiot ever!”

She threw a pillow at me with full force, and my vision turned white for a moment. *Ow, my nose!*

“I kept my mouth shut and listened, but there’s gotta be a limit to how much of an imbecile you are...”

“Hey! I get that it’s my fault, but why’re you the one—”

“Wrong! There’s no reason for you to be brooding like it’s the end of the world!” Miori cut me off and pointed her finger right at my nose.

I stared at her, dumbstruck. “Huh?”

“Don’t you ‘huh’ me, mister! Come on, this is Tatsuya’s fault no matter how you look at it. It’s your business—and nobody else’s—how you decide to act or what girls you get friendly with!”

“B-But the root cause is still me...” I said weakly.

Miori sighed. “I can’t believe this is why you looked depressed,” she told me without mercy. “Listen up. You’ve done nothing wrong, so just hold your head up high with confidence! At the very least, stop looking like this is a catastrophe. And you don’t need to apologize either! In fact, don’t you *dare* apologize to him!”

The first part of her lecture sounded like something Reita had also said. *Maybe they’re right, but that doesn’t change the fact that Tatsuya distanced himself from us. There’s nothing vibrant or fun about a future without him in it, so I want to do something,* I thought.

“Natsuki, you’re too nice,” Miori continued, completely ruthless. “That part of you is the same as always. But that’s the thing! Tatsuya-kun’s just going to feel even more miserable if you apologize.”

I was about to ask why, but I stopped myself. *If I were Tatsuya, being apologized to would feel like the worst thing ever. I’d be the one at fault whereas the other person didn’t do anything wrong. I’d just feel tormented with regret over making them apologize to me.*

“Then what do I do?” I asked after I’d finished processing her words. “Y’know, after all’s said and done.”

There’s still no solution after reevaluating the situation. I can’t do anything. I don’t even know how to act right now. As I mulled over the issue, Miori’s

warning from much earlier resurfaced in my mind.

“Hey, wait. Didn’t you say something about this? You warned me there was a problem with my plan.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t think this is what would happen when I said that,” Miori responded. She idly tapped her lips as she thought. “Though I wasn’t completely off the mark. It just looked like you were going over the top with your act. Would you really be happy with things staying like that?”

I furrowed my brow as I listened to her. *It’s true that I’m always deliberately calculating my every action with the utmost prudence and care. I have to! They’ll all hate me for sure if I show them my true self, just like last time...*

“I can see just how hard you’re working. I’ve known you for a long time, so of course I’d be able to. Honestly, you’re working so hard that no one *but* me can tell. What I’m saying is you’ve got no weak points.”

I was starting to learn how to set aside my self-perceptions and consider how others viewed me.

“Don’t get me wrong, there’s still a charm in that, but being too perfect makes it hard for people to get close to you. Even if it’s a far cry from the real you. I bet Tatsuya-kun thinks you’re superhuman!”

Okay, then what am I supposed to do?! I thought before reluctantly admitting, “I don’t think I can handle changing anything else about me. It’s already taking everything I’ve got to keep my image up.”

Miori stared me down while she considered my response. “I just came up with a plan to fix this. Well, maybe it’s a bit too direct to even call a plan.”

“Really?” I asked. I didn’t have any other ideas, so I was ready to jump on whatever she’d come up with. “I’m begging you, Miori. Please, help me!”

I thought if it came from Miori—someone who knew me even better than I knew myself sometimes—maybe there was still hope.

“Simple. Just show them your true self.”

Miori had put it so kindly, so gently, that anyone could understand, but I froze, trying to fully digest what that meant.

That's out of the question, I thought. 'Cause the real me is a loner! I'm a terrible conversationalist, I'm timid, I don't have a speck of courage to talk to anyone else—I went so far as to ignore Miori out of jealousy even though I hate being alone! I'm a hopeless teen from a gray world.

There's not a single person on this Earth who'd like someone like me. That's why I've been working so hard to change myself.

"Listen carefully. I like you," Miori confessed out of nowhere.

I thought she was teasing me, but the earnest look in her eyes swayed me.

"I like you when you're working hard to change yourself, but I like the real you too." Miori spoke slowly, as if to persuade me. That allowed each word to permeate throughout my heart.

I could feel my cheeks getting hot. Perhaps she'd noticed my embarrassment because she also gradually turned red and averted her eyes.

After an awkward moment, Miori said, "But don't get the wrong idea. I mean that as a friend. We're childhood friends who just can't stop running into each other. Got it? The point is that you don't have to hide anything in front of me! Say whatever you want!"

I hesitated before timidly saying, "You mean it? Can I really?"

"Come on. Natsuki, those other five are your friends, right?" she asked.

I nodded. *At least, I think they're my friends.*

"Can you really call someone your friend when you don't ever let your walls down or be honest with them?"

I blanked out. I didn't know the correct answer to that question. However, I did know that what Miori was describing was exactly what I was doing right now.

"Can the relationship you have with everyone right now really get you to that rainbow-colored youth you're aiming for?" she questioned further.

She was right to question me. It was just as she'd said. Yet if I agreed with her, it would feel like I was renouncing all the efforts I'd made to change. I was scared of what she would say, but I asked anyway. "Then, are you saying all the work I put in to change myself was a waste of time?"

What do I do if she agrees? I wondered. *How am I supposed to continue on if my efforts are denied?* Doubts floated through my mind, filling me with distress.

"I didn't say that. Look at you now! You've made some good friends," Miori replied readily. "But changing yourself and hiding yourself are two different things. I'm not saying it's necessarily a bad thing to hide yourself, but I think if you keep things as they are, your friends will feel some kind of wall separating you from them."

Miori pointed at my nose again. "Isn't that the reason Tatsuya-kun's distanced himself from you? Of course, I'll be there to point out what's bad about your true self. So don't be afraid, and be honest with them!" she declared proudly.

I don't know if that's the correct move, I thought, *but my childhood friend said it herself, and she knows me best. Maybe I really can experience that rainbow-colored youth if you've got my back,* I thought. I decided to believe in her.

I finally acknowledged Miori as my fellow conspirator in my Rainbow-Colored Youth Plan.

Okay, I'll do it. I'll come clean to them.

It didn't matter how utterly terrifying the notion was—I'd do it to become true friends with them all.

When I arrived at school the next Monday, I immediately went over to Tatsuya's desk and stood in front of it with so much boldness that not even he could ignore me.

Tatsuya looked up at me and asked, "What do you want, Natsuki?"

"Can we talk?" I jabbed my thumb towards the door to indicate that we

should leave the classroom.

He remained silent. I took that as a yes and walked out of the classroom without another word. Tatsuya looked confused for a second but followed me anyway.

I felt our classmates staring at us as we exited the room; I could understand why. Our friend group already stood out from the rest of the class, and our most conspicuous member, Tatsuya, had suddenly gone rogue. It had been quite the topic for gossip. Now that we were finally talking, of course it'd cause a stir. Hoshimiya and co.'s eyes were among those watching us.

For better or for worse, the two of us stood out a lot. I led Tatsuya up to the roof since we were unlikely to have a private conversation in the classroom or a hallway. The roof was off-limits in name only. Because the lock was broken, realistically anyone could go up there. Many students even ate their lunch there.

Nobody should be up there around now, though, I thought. Tatsuya followed me obediently up the stairs. I opened the broken door, walked to the outer fencing, and turned to face him.

Our eyes met. Tatsuya looked uncomfortable.

"What's this about?" he asked me.

"I don't need to explain it to you. Aren't you our friend?" I asked directly.

Tatsuya averted his gaze and hesitated. "I told you already. Leave me alone."

"Until when? It's already been a whole week."

"You guys are probably better off without someone like me around. So don't worry about it."

"Why do you think that? Maybe it doesn't mean much to you, but I don't think that's true at all."

"Of course not, I didn't think you would. But that's all I've had on my mind lately. I'm much more of a pussy than I thought I was," Tatsuya said bitterly. The usual Tatsuya brimming with confidence was nowhere to be seen. He looked terribly pathetic.

He continued to explain himself. “I know already. I’m...I’m jealous of you. The feeling’s so strong that it’s turned into something more than envy. I don’t want to feel that way towards my friend, so I should stay away from you.”

I took a breath, clearing away my hesitation, and asked, “Is this because Uta and I are close?” After all, what else could I do but knock down the wall he’d put up?

“So you figured it out?” he replied after a pause.

“I didn’t. Reita told me,” I answered him honestly.

“I see. Yeah, that’s right. It’s an unrequited love. I’ve liked her since middle school.” Tatsuya’s face reddened slightly. He walked up next to me, leaned his elbows on the fencing, and stared out at the rooftop scenery. “I was surprised that I could feel so jealous. I couldn’t come up with a single way to take back Uta’s feelings ’cause of that. I can’t win at anything when you’re my opponent. The only thing I was good at was basketball...and you beat me easily even though I gave it my all.”

I wanted to tell him that it hadn’t been an easy victory on my end, but hearing it from me wouldn’t have convinced Tatsuya. Besides, I would likely win every single time if we played right now. That’s how great the difference between us was.

“Y’know, Tatsuya—”

“Don’t apologize,” he said, having anticipated my next reply. “I’m the one at fault here. There’s nothing on your shoulders, so don’t apologize.” With that, Tatsuya looked satisfied with our talk and began walking back to the door. “Enough of this crap. Let’s go back to class.”

“Oy, Tatsuya,” I called out again.

“What else do you want?” He turned around, confused.

“You thought I was gonna apologize? Don’t kid yourself, dumbass. I came here to give you a piece of my mind,” I said.

He looked baffled. “Huh?”

I decided I'd be honest, so I'll tell him what I really think, flame and all! I mean, c'mon, if I think about it calmly, I've got nothing to apologize for. He's jealous of me because I'm too perfect? What a load of bull... Okay, well, I also get jealous of other people for nonsensical reasons too.

Anyway! I see why Miori called me an idiot. You and me both, Tatsuya, we're a couple of idiots.

"You keep calling yourself cowardly or whatever, but you're just a moron."

Skeptically he asked, "Where's this coming from? Sure, I might be, in your eyes—"

"You must be blind. Use your brain; there's no way a perfect human could exist," I said as I pointed my finger at him.

"But it's true," Tatsuya replied, but it lacked backbone.

"Yeah, it might be true from your perspective, and I get why you assume I am. So listen up and think for once! I've been straining myself ever since the entrance ceremony. I've been carefully and nervously deliberating every *single* move, no matter how minor. Of course you'd think I was perfect."

"You were nervous?" Tatsuya looked at me dubiously. "Quit it with the jokes."

"I'm not joking. I've been working hard; you just can't see it. There's no reason for you to be jealous of me." I stared him down. "Don't run away from me, Tatsuya. Face me head-on."

"I don't believe a word of what you're saying. I don't see that in you at all. You make everything you do look as easy as breathing. Hell, even the laid-back look on your face might as well be screaming, 'No sweat!'"

"That's my line, you damn popular jock! You make friends with everyone so easily, and you live your youth without a care in the world. When I try to do the same, I feel like my mental energy is being drained away."

"Huh?"

The conversation kept dragging on and I grew irritated. *Why the hell is an ideal popular kid like you feeling jealous of me? If anyone should be jealous, it's*

me!

“I’ll spell it out for you, Tatsuya, so pay attention. I’m about to shatter whatever illusion you’ve got of me.” Full of smugness, I thrust my finger at him harder.

When I imagined what I was about to say, I could already feel my cheeks heating up. But I’d resolved to be honest. I didn’t care if it came at the cost of some embarrassment.

“My name is Haibara Natsuki! I was a gloomy otaku at the bottom of the social ladder before my high school debut! Nice to meet you again!”

Those beyond-lame words poured out like scathing hot lava as I tried to play it cool. Tatsuya looked flabbergasted. All he could muster was another, “Huh?”

Yep, saw that coming, I thought.

“I’m not lying. If you want proof, here’s what I looked like in middle school!” I showed Tatsuya my phone. He had a front-row seat to a picture of the past me, decked out in gross fat rolls and glasses, like the embodiment of a stereotypical classroom loser. *I’m so repulsive that I’m gonna cry!*

“Bwa ha ha! Got a problem with that?!” I added aggressively.



Sure, my mood is going haywire, but cut me some slack! The secret I've been hiding since the beginning of the school year has been exposed by my own two hands. You could even say this is the real me.

"Uh, no, I don't..." Tatsuya said as he glanced at my phone. "Is this really you?"

"You think I'm lying? Look carefully; we've got the same face."

Tatsuya stared at the photo. "Are you serious? What? Really?" He then started scrolling through my photos, exposing my collection of beautiful 2D girls.

"Idiot! Stop looking at my wife without permission!" I scolded him.

"I didn't believe you, but after seeing all that, now I'm starting to," Tatsuya finally admitted.

"Don't lump all otaku together as losers. That's not true these days."

"Hey, you never said you were into this otaku stuff before."

"I told you I was being careful..." I looked away. "Because I wanted to look good."

Explaining that I've been putting up a front is killing me—I repeat—this is killing me! What kind of terrible penance is this?! And I'm doing it all for this blockhead. Oh man, I'm pissed! You've gotta be kidding me.

For the first time today, Tatsuya smiled—deviously. "You're the one who hid it, so doesn't that mean *you're* the one who thinks otaku are losers?"

"Quiet, you! Don't start digging into the profound psyche of the gloomy otaku mind!"

But perhaps he was right. I'd naturally latched onto light novels and anime because I was alone. And I'd kept quiet about my hobby because I didn't think anyone in this group could relate, but that was just an excuse. The real reason I'd hid it was because I viewed it as a hobby for losers, even though there were plenty of popular kids who called themselves otaku nowadays!

"Oho. So this is your hobby? And this is you. Huh," Tatsuya mused as he

continued to browse through my photos, even after I'd told him to stop. "What happened to this creepy otaku to become as handsome as you are now? What'd you do?"

"Shut up! My face has always been decent. My childhood friend'll guarantee it's me. I just looked like that because I was chubby, and I didn't care about my appearance. That's all. I worked my butt off over spring break!"

"All for your high school debut?" he asked.

"That's right. I admired guys like you."

"You admire me?" Tatsuya stared at me blankly. His happy-go-lucky face pissed me off.

"That's what I've been telling you this whole time." I brought my face closer to his and glared. "Jealousy is a me thing. Give it back! Having someone I admire be jealous of me is like a bolt from the blue, so stop it! All the moves I make to be a popular kid are ripped off from you and Reita, anyway."

"Well, that crazy thing you just said definitely stinks of a dweeb."

"Stop dissing me at every chance just because you found out about my high school debut!" I shouted, indignant.

Tatsuya let out an overexaggerated sigh. "Man, you're a ball of annoyingness."

"You're the annoying one! I don't want to hear that from you! You made me do this because you were being a pussy! Stop it with the wallowing and come back already!" I looked him in the eyes. "Everyone's waiting."

I could see hesitation in Tatsuya's expression. *He really is a bothersome guy*, I thought and then laid it on him further. "Don't run away, Tatsuya. If you like Uta that much, then steal her back. Aren't you ashamed of being scared of a sham like me? I'm the one who's scared of you!"

What am I saying? I barely understand what's coming out of my own mouth. That was way too fired up! But I didn't stop the onslaught. I was finally speaking my mind, after all. "Uta'll never look your way if you keep running. You'll never beat me if you keep this up!"

“I don’t like the way you’re looking down on me. It’s irritating to hear all this from a high school debuter.”

“You think so? Whoops, that’s true,” I said sheepishly. “You’re right. Sorry about that.”

“Are you emotionally unstable?!” Tatsuya quipped.

“Shut up! I just had to divulge my true feelings, so I don’t know how to act right now!”

“So you really were putting on an act,” he said in surprise.

“Yeah, that’s right! Unlike you, no one would like my plain old self, so I did what I had to! This is all I really am in the end; I’m the furthest thing from perfect! So stop acting like a loser and running away from someone like me!” I yelled.

Then I said, “You’re not acting like the Tatsuya I aspired to be.”

The wind blew across the rooftop, fluttering Tatsuya’s short hair back and forth. “Yeah, well,” he said, then hesitated. “What am I supposed to tell them? I can’t just go back without an explanation.”

“The explanation’s all on you. Just tell them, ‘I really, reeeally love Uta-chan, but lately she’s been getting close to Natsuki-kun, so I was blinded by jealousy. On top of that, I can’t beat him at anything, so I ran away like the lamest guy ever!’” I mocked.

“Did you have to put it like that?!” he barked back.

“I’m just stating the truth!”

“I don’t want to hear about the ‘truth’ from you! Okay, well, it is the truth! But I don’t want to take it from someone else! And I don’t want Uta to find out either!”

“Tsk. You really are a coward. So that’s why your love’s been one-sided for so long. I’m disappointed.”

“Hey! Even if that *is* true, don’t you think you’re being too mean?!”

“Y’know, I used to be afraid of you, but now I know you’re nothing to be scared of.” I shrugged and began walking back to class. “Come on. Let’s go.”

It was almost time for our morning homeroom to start, and I had no intention of skipping it for a guy like him.

“Dammit... What the hell is going on?” Tatsuya grumbled as he followed me.

Looks like I’ve got nothing to worry about anymore. I wonder how he’ll explain the story to the others, I thought with a smile as I opened the door.

“Ah, hey?!”

“Wh-Whaaat?!”

“Hikari?! Hey, don’t pull!”

Three very familiar girls cried out and fell to the ground like dominoes with a loud *FWOMP!*

Huh? What the heck? My brain stopped processing. I did a double take—no, a triple take. No matter how many times I looked, the three on the ground were most definitely Uta, Hoshimiya, and Nanase. *Oh, come on! You too, Nanase?!*

I glanced through the door again to find Reita standing there with a wry smile. “I tried to stop them, you know, but they really wanted to listen in,” he explained.

A realization slowly dawned on me. With the way the three of them had toppled over, I could only surmise that they’d been leaning against the door. To be specific, they’d been pressing their ears against the door—all so they could hear what was going on out here on the roof. *So that’s how it is.*

Now that the gears in my head were fully turning, I finally spoke up. “Which means you guys heard our conversation?”

“Yeah...” they all admitted with guilt. The most uncomfortable-looking of the bunch was Uta.

I turned to look at Tatsuya, who looked even more stupefied than me. *I’ve heard that people calm down when they see someone more shaken than them, and it looks like that’s true.*

“U-Um, we heard everything. Sorry for eavesdropping!” Uta looked uncertain about what to do but started off with an apology anyway.

I’ve never seen her flounder so hard before. I guess this is quite the delicate topic to tackle, I thought.

Uta, slightly red-faced, looked at Tatsuya and said, “Um, well, sorry? Tatsu, I... I only see you as a friend.”

Uh, did she just deal the finishing blow?! Even I, socially inept as I was, felt taken aback by her horrendous timing. *Now is really not the time for that!* I nervously peeked in Tatsuya’s direction. He looked like he was about to crumble into a pile of dust.

“H-Hey! Tatsuya! Pull yourself together!” I grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him, but his head only swayed back and forth despondently. He didn’t have an ounce of fight left in him.

“Heh heh...” Tatsuya laughed listlessly. “I don’t give a crap anymore...”

Oh no, what happened to his character?! I handed the dazed Tatsuya over to Reita and whispered to Uta, “What the heck was that? Just when I finally won him back!”

“Oh, uh, sorry! I was so taken aback that it just slipped out!”

I could see Tatsuya taking additional damage from Uta’s thoughtless words. “You’re too loud!” I scolded her.

“Aaah, I’m sorry! Er, I really am, okay, Tatsu? But, uh, how do I put it? I...I’ve never thought about you that way before, so when I heard you say that, it was just so far out there that, y’know... I appreciate your feelings though,” she babbled on.

“Uta, don’t say any more. Tatsuya can’t take it.” Reita shushed her with a grim expression.

“I was wondering what happened, but it was all over something so trivial,” Nanase said with a sigh. Tatsuya drooped even closer to the ground.

“Y-Yuino-chan, you shouldn’t put it like that,” Hoshimiya timidly said.

“Really? If I were in his shoes, I’d hate it more if everyone walked on eggshells

around me.” Nanase smirked and turned to me. “Isn’t that right, Mr. High School Debutant?”

Yeah... I see; so that’s what you mean. So this is how it’s going to be now that everyone overheard us! W-Well, I steeled myself for snide remarks like that when I decided I’d tell Tatsuya!

My eyes wandered and found Hoshimiya’s. She looked at me awkwardly and with a feeble smile asked, “Um, uh, should we not mention it?”

Crestfallen, my shoulders slumped and I mustered a reply. “Nah, it’s fine. I was thinking of telling you all eventually anyway.”

Nanase stepped towards me with a suspiciously cheerful smile pasted on her face. “Then I want to see the picture you showed Nagiura-kun just now.”

She eyed my phone dangerously, so I hid it behind my back in a panic. *Showing my past self to you is a bit too much for me. I showed Tatsuya ’cause he’s my guy friend and all, but showing the girls would be more than my heart could take!*

“I... I want to see too!” Hoshimiya said, adding her opinion to the pile. She whistled innocently but stole a furtive glance at my phone.

“You too, Hoshimiya?!” I exclaimed. *I can’t show this to my crush. Hell no!*

While I was running away from the girls, I saw that Tatsuya had recovered slightly. He stood up on his own two legs, cackled darkly, and said, “There’s nothing to fear any longer.”

Looks like he’s lost a lot of his original personality. Yeah, he spouted some self-assured junk, but his face looks really pitiful, I thought. Uta and Reita regarded Tatsuya’s changed persona with worried eyes.

Tatsuya glowered at me and proclaimed, “Natsuki, I’ll never forgive you!”

“Hey, this is all your fault in the first place! Why’d you have to drag me down with you?!” I retorted.

“You reap what you sow.”

“Isn’t that my line?!”

Reita came between Tatsuya and me. “All right, stop there! Homeroom’s going to start soon,” he said as he clapped his hands.

I checked the time and it was just as Reita had said—we only had a minute left to get back. If we didn’t start running now, we’d all be marked down as late. Everybody flew into a frenzied panic. Unable to handle the idea of being late, Nanase was the first to dash back down the stairs with Reita running not far behind.

Uta was about to follow them, but Tatsuya stopped her. “Uta.”

Hoshimiya and I were bringing up the rear, so we witnessed everything.

“Hm? What is it?” Uta asked.

“I won’t give up,” Tatsuya declared earnestly, then ran off.

For a coward who kept up a one-sided crush for years, looks like you can do it if you try, Tatsuya, I thought to myself.

Uta stood stock-still, face flushed red.

Hoshimiya let out a little squeal of joy, causing Uta to blush even harder. Then Hoshimiya met my gaze with stars in her eyes. I could tell romance fascinated her greatly.

“How nice! It really feels like a slice of high school life,” Hoshimiya gushed.

Feeling much the same, I sighed and shrugged my shoulders. “Yeah, it really is nice. It really *does* feel like a slice of high school life.”

And a vibrant one at that. I guess it’s true that the rainbow after the rain is beautiful, I thought.

Final Chapter: Onward to the Next Plan with My Childhood Friend

“Well, isn’t that great for you?” Miori said after a sip of coffee. I’d just finished recounting recent events to her.

We were at my workplace, Café Mares. The coffee here was simply divine, so I’d been coming in as a patron. The employee discount was also a nice bonus.

I was treating Miori to some coffee today as thanks for coming up with a solution to my Tatsuya problem. It would’ve been a pain to explain why we were together if Nanase had seen us, but she wasn’t on the clock today.

“Thanks. You really saved my ass,” I said.

“Wow, you’re being unusually honest,” Miori replied.

“C’mon,” I sulked, “weren’t you the one who told me to be honest?”

Miori grinned and rested her chin in her hands. “Well, truth be told, I think the whole thing would’ve resolved itself even if I hadn’t come up with anything.”

“What?”

“Think about it. I bet Tatsuya already knew he was going down a bad road, and if it had dragged on any longer, I’m sure Reita-kun would’ve done something to force him back. Probably.”

Now that you mention it... Yeah, that does sound likely. Reita’s the one who said time would solve it all. An alternate interpretation of that is that if time didn’t solve it, he’d take matters into his own hands.

“Hm? Wait a minute. Doesn’t that mean it was pointless for me to humiliate myself?” I said slowly.

Miori chuckled. “I don’t think it was pointless. Plus, it was funny!” she teased.

Looks like everyone’s going to make fun of me about this forever, I thought in

dismay.

“Besides, didn’t you get closer to them in the end? Sure, they know about your past, for better or worse, but now you can be more relaxed around them. You don’t have to push yourself to put on a show all the time,” Miori continued, making a reasonable point.

“Well, I guess that’s true,” I grudgingly agreed. *I really didn’t want Hoshimiya to find out about my past self, though! Guys always want to look cool in front of the girl they like.*

“And best of all, if you’re closer to them, that means I’ll be able to get closer to Reita-kun.” Miori’s cheeks were downright rosy. She clasped her hands together as if she were praying and wiggled in her seat. “I’ve given you so much advice, so you’d better help me out too! We’re fellow conspirators, after all, right?”

Honestly, that sounds like a pain, but a deal’s a deal, I thought. In return for her assistance with my Rainbow-Colored Youth Plan, I’ll help her cozy up to Reita. Miori knows me like the back of her hand, so she’s the only person I can really rely on. Meanwhile, I can offer certain ins since I’m friends with Reita and the gang. Our interests align.

“Yeah, I gotta do what I gotta do. So, do you have some kind of plan?” I asked reluctantly.

“I do! I call it ‘Plan Double Date’! It’ll be you and me and then Reita-kun and Hoshimiya-chan for a fun party of four. It’ll be a good chance for you to get to know Hikari-chan better, killing two birds with one stone!” Miori explained with much enthusiasm.

“What? Hell no. That’s basically advertising that I have a crush on her. I’d die of embarrassment!”

“Are you a romance noob?!” Miori made a great show of slumping over dejectedly.

“I want to proceed cautiously. I don’t want Hoshimiya to know I like her. In fact, I don’t even think Hoshimiya is aware of me as a guy. Once the mood between us gets better, then...” I didn’t finish my thought.

“Ugh, you’re just being spineless. Sooo unmanly!” she mocked.

“How dare you?! I’m deliberating about this really hard! I’m just trying to improve my chances of success—” I started indignantly, but our rowdy debate was interrupted by someone tapping me on the shoulder.

Kirishima-san was standing behind me. “I’m glad you’re having fun, but can you be quieter?” she said.

“Oops...” Miori and I looked around to see that an older man, one of the café’s regulars, was watching us with an amused smile. Flustered, we both bowed and apologized, but he just waved it off and went back to reading.

“This is all your fault,” I said.

“What? You were the one yelling,” Miori countered.

We glared at each other and huffed. Kirishima looked at us and smiled teasingly. “Ah, youth! Is she your girlfriend?”

It took me a moment to comprehend the question, but I soon started shaking my head vigorously.

“No! I’d never—!” we noisily denied in unison. Outraged to have spoken up simultaneously, we returned to our glaring contest.

Kirishima snickered loudly at the whole thing as she went back to work.

“I need to date Reita-kun ASAP so no one makes such insinuations again,” Miori muttered.

“I feel you... I want Hoshimiya to be my girlfriend,” I said with a wistful sigh. I was used to thinking as much quietly to myself, but admitting it out loud made me feel more embarrassed than usual. My cheeks turned scarlet.

“Ew, gross,” Miori said regarding my lovestruck state.

Shut up, I thought.



“All right. I’m on board with your plan!” I declared. *I think I’m successfully past the first step of my Rainbow-Colored Youth Plan. Not only have I made friends, but all six of us enjoy hanging out together!*

“Oho, no take backs, okay?” Miori told me. “Nice, then let’s smooth out the details.” She began brainstorming.

Since I’ve cleared stage one, it’s time for stage two—get a girlfriend. I like Hoshimiya, so I’ll make her fall for me, confess to her, and then bam! Girlfriend!

Feeling revitalized, I began running towards my next goal.

My original three years of high school were gray and gloomy. I’d been haunted by those regrets even after graduating. You only realize what’s important after you lose it, and you can never return to the past—at least, that’s how it should’ve been.

Who knows why or how, but I was given a chance to redo my youth. Things don’t go swimmingly just because you know what happened in the past. Well, they didn’t for me at any rate. But right now, I’m putting everything I’ve got into living my best life, so that I can seize hold of my wish.

I believe that someday, when I look back on the past, my memories of right now will be filled with rainbows.

<End>

Afterword

Believe it or not, I have never once wished to redo my teen years.

Naturally, I have my fair share of dark moments, the very thought of which make me want to writhe in shame on my own bed. But when I look back at my past as a whole, I'm content with the youth that I lived. I did my best in my own way and I enjoyed it.

But I was blessed with family, friends, and my sweetheart, all of whom helped my immature self. If I'd been unlucky, or in the wrong place at the wrong time even just once, the colors of my youth might've changed drastically. If my adolescence had ended in gray, I'm sure I would've wished to redo it—all to experience that rainbow-colored youth I missed out on.

The theme of this work was born from such thoughts.

Nice to meet you, or perhaps it's good to see you again. I'm Amamiya Kazuki.

I am very honored to have received the 2020 HJ Novel Grand Prize, which led to this book's publication. This work was originally called *The Gray Boy's Rainbow-Colored Youth Plan*, but it was retitled to *Haibara's Teenage New Game+*. Isn't that nice and catchy?

Well, my editor came up with it, not me. Great work as always!

Now then, how did you enjoy this second chance at high school rom-com? If you liked reading it, please share your impressions on Twitter. A certain author will be diligently egosurfing online after this book's release, and I'm sure it'll make him happy. Or perhaps you'll recommend this work to your friends. Because the more readers there are, the more hope there will be for a second volume.

Now, it's time for acknowledgments. First I'd like to thank my manager, N-san, for discovering this work. I'd also like to thank the illustrator, Gin-san, for the wonderful illustrations. And a huge thank-you to everyone who worked on this book's publication.

If this work has struck a chord with you, even just a tiny bit, then that is an author's greatest reward.

Now then, that's all for this volume. I hope to meet you in the next volume or perhaps even in another series.

Also check out *Eiyuu to Majo no Tensei Rabu-Kome* (*The Hero and the Witch's Reincarnation Rom-Com*, Kodansha Light Novels) which was published in Japan a month before this book!



“Ready? Smile! Cheese!”

Haibara's Teenage

NEW GAME+

Hoshimiya said and then sidled up next to me. A soft, sweet fragrance wafted up my nose ticklishly. My heartbeat accelerated right past light speed. While I was busy wondering what she was up to, our arms were already touching.

I BECAME **ONE OF THE POPULAR KIDS** DURING MY HIGH SCHOOL **REDO**. NOW I'M AT THE TOP OF THE SOCIAL LADDER.

A beautiful girl with a dignified air. Hikari's childhood friend (and guardian).
NANASE YUINO

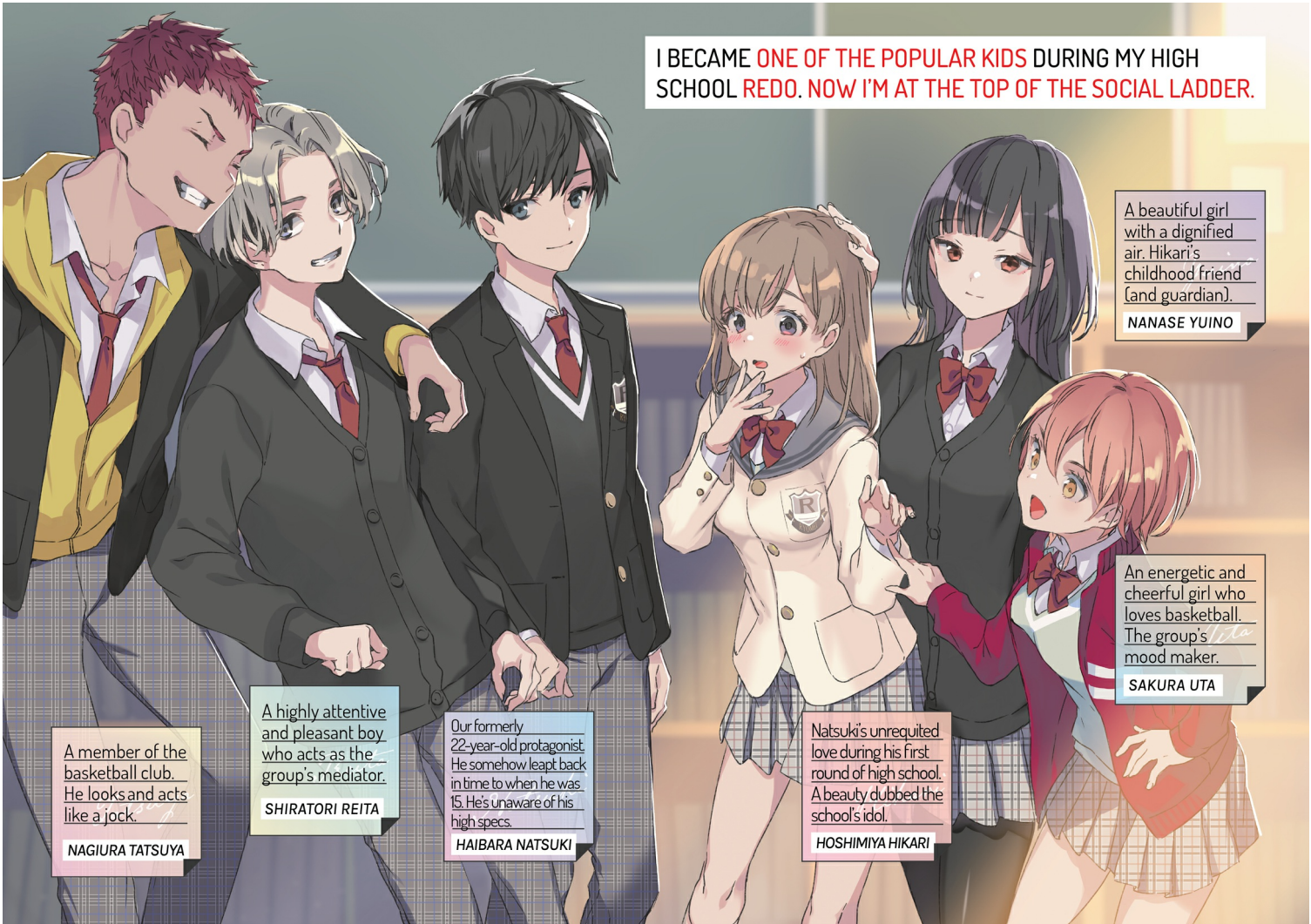
An energetic and cheerful girl who loves basketball. The group's *uta* mood maker.
SAKURA UTA

Natsuki's unrequited love during his first round of high school. A beauty dubbed the school's idol.
HOSHIMIYA HIKARI

Our formerly 22-year-old protagonist. He somehow leapt back in time to when he was 15. He's unaware of his high specs.
HAIBARA NATSUKI

A highly attentive and pleasant boy who acts as the group's mediator.
SHIRATORI REITA

A member of the basketball club. He looks and acts like a jock.
NAGIURA TATSUYA



A manga-style illustration of a young woman with long dark hair and blue eyes, wearing a light blue hoodie over a pink shirt. She is holding both hands of a person whose arms are visible in the foreground, wearing dark blue sleeves. The background is a library with bookshelves. The lighting is soft, with a pinkish glow on the woman's face.

“Listen carefully.
I like you. I like
you when you’re
working hard to
change yourself,
but I like the real
you too.”

Natsuki’s
childhood friend
who supports him
through his high
school debut.

MOMIYA MIORI

Miori spoke slowly, as
if to persuade me. That
allowed each word to
permeate throughout
my heart. I could feel
my cheeks getting hot.

Bonus Short Stories

A Lunchtime Chat

Depending on the day, any one of the six of us could be found somewhere different during lunchtime.

Tatsuya and Reita liked eating in the cafeteria, and lately I'd been joining them there too. Although my mom did make me bentos every now and then, it depended on her mood. I could have bought something from the school store, but then I would've had to eat in the classroom with the girls. That would make me the only guy eating among a group of girls, which would be pretty awkward. So obviously, eating with the guys in the cafeteria was much more my speed.

Today, however, was a rare occasion in which the girls joined us in the cafeteria, so all six of us ate together.

"I just thought it'd be fun to eat in the cafeteria for once," Hoshimiya explained cheerily.

"Since Hikari suggested it, I also held off on making a bento today," Nanase said.

"Huh? Nanase, do you always make your own bento?" I asked.

She nodded. "Yes, though it's nothing impressive. I just heat up frozen food and haphazardly pack it up."

"You say that, Yui-Yui, but you've always got something fancy looking in your lunch box," Uta pointed out.

Smiling, Nanase replied, "Well, maybe I spruce it up a tad."

"My mom usually makes lunch for me, but I thought eating in the cafeteria might be nice every once in a while," Hoshimiya said.

"And it gets boring eating a bento every day!" Uta said bluntly. "Oh, but of course I'm thankful to my mama for making it!"

Hoshimiya looked like she agreed with Uta's take although she didn't say it out loud. *Hoshimiya is way too easy to read because she's so expressive. But that's part of what makes her cute, so I'm not complaining.*

"What do you guys normally eat?" Uta asked us.

"Hmm, I typically buy the lunch of the day because it's cheap," I said.

"Yeah, but the lunch of the day is tiny," Tatsuya cut in. "It'd be good if you could order a large one." Of course an athlete like him—who burned through tons of calories every day—wouldn't be sated by the volume of food I consumed. He always had a large donburi for lunch.

"I recommend the yakitori don. It doesn't sound exciting but it's good," Reita said, nodding in agreement with his own suggestion.

I get you, I thought. It's a safe and delicious choice, like shoyu ramen.

"I'll get katsu curry!" Uta declared and ran off to the lunch ticket machine. With that, the rest of us scattered to buy our respective lunches and then gathered around a table to eat.

"Um... This is a lot bigger than I thought it would be," Nanase said once we'd all sat down. She'd ordered a ginger pork set lunch, a relatively large portion.

"Yuino-chan, you don't eat enough anyway!" Hoshimiya said.

"Don't tell me that. I'm not even a light eater compared to you," Nanase replied.

"Stop it! I feel like I eat too much when I'm with you two!" Uta interjected.

"Uh, that's got nothing to do with them. You're just a glutton," Tatsuya said, jabbing a finger towards her katsu curry.

Yeah, a normal katsu curry is already a pretty generous serving, and yet it's still no match for Uta's appetite. It's truly a mystery where all that food disappears into that tiny body.

"Our cafeteria probably decides portions with guys in mind, so even the normal-sized meals are pretty big," Tatsuya commented.

Oh, good point. Probably because our student body is eighty percent male. I

appreciate the results though.

“I don’t want to hear that coming from you, Tatsu!” Uta retorted.

“I’m not saying I’m not a big eater,” Tatsuya said, coming to his own defense. “But a large guy like me needs to eat an equally large meal.”

“Are you implying that I don’t need to eat as much because I’m small?!” Uta exclaimed.

“Oh, you got it! I’m surprised *you* managed to figure it out that quickly,” Tatsuya teased.

“What do you mean by that?!” she roared.

Eating my own food, I watched their usual banter kick off in that manner when suddenly I felt someone tapping on my shoulder. I turned to see Nanase looking at me apologetically. “Um,” she started hesitantly. “Err, would you eat this? Only if you want to.” Her gaze fell on her side dish of boiled spinach.

“You don’t like it?” I asked.

She nodded; it was kinda cute. “Yes. I feel bad throwing it out,” Nanase said sheepishly.

“Sure, I’d be happy to. I’m surprised there’s something you don’t like though,” I said with a grin.

A small pout formed on her lips and she grumbled, “What exactly do you think I am?”

A Library Encounter with Hoshimiya

Our school library was closer to the gym and club room buildings than the classrooms, so not many students visited it. Whenever I went, there were only ever a handful of people. But that was precisely why I liked being in the library. I actually hate it when you go to a library and it’s noisy though. But I digress. Our library was spacious, it had a lot of books, and there weren’t that many people coming in and crowding it up all the time.

After eating lunch with Reita and Tatsuya one day, I found myself in the

library since I had some time to spare. *I'm an introvert by nature, so being in a library or somewhere quiet just calms me down...*

I was checking out the light novels when I heard someone behind me say, "Oh, hi, Natsuki-kun."

I turned to see Hoshimiya waving at me. She was sitting by the window with a novel in her hand. "Hey, Hoshimiya. You're here too, huh?"

"I often come here after I eat lunch," she explained. "And after school when my club isn't meeting."

That's good to know! I should start coming here more, but just enough that I won't be annoying, I thought. "What're you reading?"

"It's a popular book right now! Have you heard of it?" She showed me the cover.

I nodded. "Yeah, I have." In the future, this book would receive a movie adaptation and then sell like hotcakes. It was very good, although it was only just starting to get popular around this time.

"Have you read it before? I'm only halfway through but it's great! I really like the relationship the main duo has! I adore relationships where two people can understand each other without needing to say anything..." Hoshimiya blissfully chattered away about the book.

I listened to her thoughtfully, one finger placed on my lips. After a moment, she blinked at me vacantly, turned bright red, and then covered her mouth with both hands. Everyone in the library was staring at us.

"S-Sorry! I get too excited when I talk about books..." Hoshimiya said quietly.

"Very like you," I said and shrugged in acceptance. *That's a very otaku trait for a popular kid with high communication skills to have,* I thought. *But that's another thing that makes her cute. She really is the best!*

"O-Oh! Since you're here, do you have any books you recommend?" she asked, trying to move past her embarrassment.

Hmmm. I only ever read light novels, so I don't know many normal titles. I do know some famous ones, so I'll stick to those, I thought. "What genres do you

like?" I asked her.

"Hmmm. I'll read anything, but I gravitate to mysteries the most. I also like books that are touching. Let's see, what else?" Hoshimiya mused aloud. "I like works about adolescence. You know the ones with a lot of main characters?"

"Sounds similar to what I like! I'm not choosy, so I just try to keep up with what's trending."

"Really! Heh heh, that makes me kinda happy," Hoshimiya said with a soft smile.

I cocked my head to the side and asked, "Why?"

"Of course I'd be happy; someone I'm close to likes the same stuff as me! Think about it. There aren't many people who read for fun these days. Everyone spends their free time watching videos on YouTube and whatnot nowadays."

Heh heh, we're close... Hoshimiya and I are close! Heh heh heh! I relished those words, letting them float around in my mind.

"Natsuki-kun?" Hoshimiya called out.

Whoops, I went into a daze there. I wiped the creepy smile off my face and cleared my throat. "Yeah, true!" I said. "There's all sorts of entertainment out there these days." But at the same time, I thought, *I'm sure there are fewer people who pick up books to read for fun with all the options out there. As a bona fide otaku, I honestly prefer manga over books too. They're easier to read.*

"I get it, though. It can be hard to open a book sometimes," she said despondently.

I had a feeling that Hoshimiya's excitement would wilt if we lingered on this topic any longer, so I pulled the conversation back to its original focus. "Anyway, I'll recommend some books to you."

"Really?" Her expression immediately brightened up.

I know some books that are going to become popular, and they're recent enough that Hoshimiya probably hasn't read them yet. Let's go with those, I decided. "I think I saw a mystery novel I liked on that shelf over there."

I walked over to the shelf to search for the book in question with an eager

Hoshimiya in tow.

Bumping into Uta after School

I was on class duty today, so I ended up staying behind to wrap up various tasks like wiping the blackboard and filling out the class journal. Because of this, I left school later than normal, but I didn't have work today, so it wasn't much of an issue.

As I was heading out, I spotted Uta sitting on the steps in front of the gym with a towel draped over her neck. As soon as she saw me passing by, she slipped her sandals on and ran towards me. I'd never seen her in basketball wear, so it was a pleasant change of pace.

"Heyo! Going home?" she asked cheerfully.

"Mm-hmm. Are you taking a break now?" I replied.

"Yeah. Coach made us do three-man weave drills until we dropped. I'm beat..." Uta said with alarmingly little energy.

I-Is it just me or do her eyes look dead inside...? I thought. "I'm impressed that your coach can find a way to exhaust your energy, Uta."

"I'm not always a ball of energy, you know," she complained feebly as she wiped the sweat off with her towel. "Especially not during practice. My stamina's nothing much; I'm always worn out. Aaah, I'm pooped!"

I only ever see Uta when she's a ball of sunshine, so this is a refreshing new experience. Well, I guess everyone looks a little dead when they've been training like crazy.

"Natsu, do you wanna sub in for me?"

"I don't think anyone would be fooled if I tried to replace you. There's a large height disparity."

"Ugh, true. It's not faaaair!" Uta wailed, glaring reproachfully at me for being so tall.

It's understandable. Height is the greatest weapon of all in basketball.

Someone as small as Uta would definitely be jealous.

“Give me some of your height!” she demanded.

“I don’t think that would be possible,” I replied coolly.

“Then share some of your strength with me!”

“I don’t use it, so I would if I could.” I shrugged, unable to solve her troubles.

Uta puffed up her cheeks in a pout. “I’m exhausted, but Miorin is so composed! Where’s the justice?!”

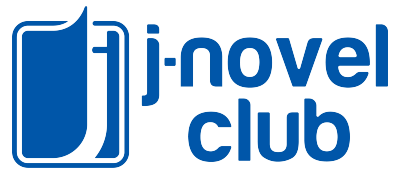
“That girl’s stamina has been bottomless since we were kids. She wasn’t called the ‘brat commander’ for nothing,” I said, agreeing.

“What’s a brat commander?” Uta tilted her head in puzzlement.

She acts so differently now that no one would get it even if I tried to explain, I speculated. Just as I thought that, Miori waved to Uta from inside the gym.

“Hey, Uta, practice is starting again!” she yelled.

“Okaaaay. Well, see ya tomorrow, Natsu!” Uta said before running back to the gym.



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Haibara's Teenage New Game+ Volume 1

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